

# DIPLOMACY EDUCATION

## Unzipped

**Who is a diplomat in today's world? The differences between the academic's and the practitioner's approach to teaching diplomacy point to some answers.**

BY DONNA MARIE OGLESBY

**T**he concept of diplomacy has long lacked cultural resonance in the United States. The late R. Smith Simpson, a career U.S. Foreign Service officer credited with stimulating the creation of the Georgetown Institute for the Study of Diplomacy in 1978, was said to have been an “absolute pit bull” on making the intricacies of diplomacy a key component of the curriculum. He left ISD in 1992, when the curriculum strayed from that objective. “Diplomacy was a neglected field. It wasn’t sexy,” Dean Peter Krogh noted at the time of Simpson’s death. “Everyone wants to talk about what we want to do in the world; not a lot want to talk about how to get it done.” That is still true today.

Diplomacy has been squeezed out of the course catalogs in American higher education by the two master frames driving American views of how to deal with the world: defend against it, or transform it. Americans are far less interested in managing international relations through perpetual systemic engagement. They want either to avoid or to fix problems, transcending the never-ending compromises of diplomacy, which seem to many both old-world and old-hat.

Yet, while they are few and far between, courses on diplomacy do exist. After an extensive search in 2013, I found and reviewed more than 60 diplomacy course syllabi, with a subset on public diplomacy, and conducted lengthy interviews with a majority of the teachers. The courses are found occasionally in

departments of international relations and history, most often in member institutions of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs, and they are taught by both academics and practitioners (mostly retired FSOs). Course content varies widely, based on the personal experiences and the disciplines of those teaching. I could not find a common core.

Whereas academics traditionally teach an understanding of what the international institution of diplomacy is and how it changes over time, FSOs emphasize how American foreign affairs institutions are organized, how foreign policy is determined and conducted, and what the specifics of foreign policies are. But beyond that distinction, I found greater patterns of difference between courses designed by academics and those created by American practitioners than would be expected from a close reading of the literature on the gap between international

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relations theory and practice. Something else is going on here that we need to understand. What the two communities teach in terms of skills and procedures, as well as the beliefs that inform them, the values that sustain them and the theories that lie behind them, differ significantly.

These differences get at the heart of whether diplomacy in the United States is a unique profession with a defined body of knowledge and skill set, or merely a practice by a collection of experts with assorted technical knowledge and skills. Who is a diplomat in today's world? The U.S. Foreign Service has a vital stake in the answer to that question, given the displacement of the State Department as the central axis of official American external relations and the encroachment by politically well-connected Americans, intent on replacing members of the career Service.

## The American Fabric

The main institutions of American society do not support diplomacy as either a professional practice or a field of study. Many Americans have no idea what diplomats do. Others think diplomacy is no longer necessary because the fabric of global society is one felted whole, so densely matted together that sovereign boundaries are irrelevant and slight national differences can be managed. They see no need for a corps of uniquely skilled professionals, deeply knowledgeable in the histories, languages and cultures of foreign societies.

In this rosy vision of flattened, fibrous, global unity, where there is no "foreign," foreign policy is optional, and diplomats are unnecessary. Instead, private individuals, with technical knowledge, functional expertise and global reach, network to fix the problems created by rapid compression into global oneness. Readily available in civil society, such expertise is best assembled around issues of concern to bind societies one to another apolitically, without distrusted national governments getting in the way. The corresponding academic track in APSIA schools is human development, including public health.

By contrast, those Americans who view today's newly felted world as a pathological mess want protection from it, not

engagement with it. They want military and intelligence options to prevent, shape and win conflicts that they believe threaten the continued existence of the exceptional American way of life and the global order that sustains it. The corresponding academic track in international policy schools is security studies, including intelligence.

Academic and societal embrace of the boundary-less term "global," instead of the boundary-crossing term "international," erases the very idea of the "foreign." Without that concept, interdisciplinary area studies—the focus on the particularities of regions and nations with palpable histories, cultures, languages and concerns of their own—diminish in value. As a subject of study, diplomacy, which provides understanding of the political means needed to achieve any foreign policy goal, given those complex external realities, is barely visible. Nor is there much demand for it.

In the American system of higher education, students are consumers who choose to fill the seats in the classrooms. Research shows that members of the millennial generation, shaped by 9/11 and the 2008 recession, are hyper-individualistic, identify as global citizens, and distrust government and large bureaucratic institutions. These characteristics drive their career goals and, therefore, course preferences. Their identity as global citizens also might explain why courses on public diplomacy, in which they imagine themselves as technologically empowered individual actors, are more subscribed than those on diplomacy itself.

Over the last decade, while diplomacy has been sidelined, foreign affairs job growth in America has been in the intelligence/security sector and in nongovernmental human rights and development organizations. American students who are inclined toward international affairs want to acquire the skills and concepts that will qualify them to get the jobs that American society has on offer. International students, by contrast, many of whom are already diplomats or aspire to become diplomats for their countries, do want to study the field. They comprise, on average, a third of students in all the classes I surveyed. Diplomacy course instructors also frequently mention the subsidized



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Eckerd College students in Donna Oglesby's spring 2012 "Diplomacy and International Relations" course work in country teams playing the online international relations game called "Simulating Statecraft."

Pickering-Rangel Fellows as faithful enrollees. Without the presence of these two groups in the classrooms, the seats would go empty. Courses taught by FSOs do attract other students, not because of their interest in diplomacy, but because of their thirst for the practical skills and knowledge required to operate in the international policy sphere, inside or outside of government.

### Practitioner Course Design

Courses on diplomacy designed by American practitioners exemplify statecraft. They are usually extended case studies grounded in the soil of the particular: "Yemen: Crafting a

Comprehensive Strategy for a Fragile State" or "U.S. Borders and Borderlands." Even when the course titles carry the more generic "Creating a 21st-Century Diplomacy" or "Doing Diplomacy," the focus is on the bilateral and multilateral relationships represented by human actors (their motivations, personalities and interests), as well as on case-specific foreign policy decision-making and implementation.

True to the society from which they come, American diplomats focus their courses on the foreign policy problems that the United States confronts. They pay attention to the institutional and operational infrastructure that must be managed, as well

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as the formulation of sound policy advice at home and effective representation abroad. As heirs of George F. Kennan, American diplomats do not experience diplomacy in a compartment by itself. Kennan explained why in *Measures Short Of War*: “The stuff of diplomacy is in the entire fabric of our foreign relations with other countries, and it embraces every phase of national power and every phase of national dealing.” Today, we are accustomed to seeing our national diplomatic system range across departments responsible for diplomacy, development and defense.

Some FSOs teaching diplomacy write their own case studies and simulations. Others make use of the rich collection developed and made available by the Harvard Kennedy School Case Program and the Georgetown Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. Although there are wonderful case studies on negotiations, international bargaining and conflict resolution, the vast majority center on the domestic struggle to determine American foreign policy, rather than the means by which policies, once determined, are carried out. So again, the techniques of diplomacy as an instrument of statecraft receive minor attention.

The diplomat, however, writes a syllabus with the wisdom gained and hands dirtied from hard work in the field. Knowledge does not precede and is not separable from practice; it is created by it. Doing diplomacy for decades prior to teaching gives the practitioner a background understanding of the subject, guiding them to insights and intuitions about the realities of the practice. The challenge is how to share this understanding. To teach effectively, practitioners first have to structure their own thinking and reflect upon what they might offer students, while being true to who they are.

Reading assignments convey regional or issue-specific knowledge; they are interdisciplinary, sometimes biographical and policy-relevant. Very rarely do FSOs assign readings from the academic subfield of diplomatic studies; somewhat more often, they include material from the fields of foreign policy analysis and diplomatic history. Most admitted in our interviews that they had no time for reading academic literature while practicing their profession and began doing so only after deciding to teach. Thus, their reading is governed by what they have

already chosen to teach as they search for materials to support their course objectives. Often, they adopt material used by other teaching FSOs.

### Think of a Zipper

In spite of the limitations of the material chosen, the story of American diplomatic practice that emerges from syllabi written by practitioners is one of professionals for whom power, process and values are inherently linked. They go into the world representing the United States and, repeatedly crossing sovereign boundaries, figure out the personalities of the people who count on the issues that matter to the United States, and then build personal relationships to manage national differences and align them politically to achieve objectives. They succeed when they understand the political communities in which they work well enough to advance the objectives of the community they represent with knowledge, tact and integrity.

One metaphor for this approach is a zipper. We ask a lot of a zipper slider, that small little piece with a tiny handle that we operate by hand to mesh or separate the alternating teeth on chains attached to adjacent flexible parts. We know from experience that when the slide fastener fails, when it is no longer able to couple and interlock the teeth protruding from fabric tape attached to the separated sides, we are in trouble. Jackets are no longer warm, luggage is no longer safely sealed shut, and blue jeans are a bit more exposing than we intended. The slider is an inexpensive part, really. But when it does not work properly—when it does not engage the articulated teeth, align the sides and withstand the tension between them—the expense of fixing the ensuing problem can be quite substantial.

Diplomacy is like that. As diplomacy studies theorist Paul Sharp conceives of it, diplomacy routinely enmeshes separated political communities into a single international whole, while recognizing the plurality of interests and values that keep nations wanting to be apart. Fundamentally, diplomacy functions politically through a series of nearly imperceptible adjustments along the chain of relationships between representatives of states and the international organizations created



by states to manage international order.

Like the humble zipper, diplomacy is a modest everyday tool with a significant function. It is a permanent dialogue conducted on a daily basis by American representatives with their foreign counterparts. We take it for granted when diplomacy succeeds in protecting and advancing our national interests, as it should; and we pay the price when, by abuse, neglect or ignorance, the profession fails in its responsibility.

### Academics: Think Velcro

For academics teaching diplomacy, the zipper conveys an image of classical interstate diplomacy, but it does not capture the complexity of diplomacy in today's mixed-actor global environment. Diplomatic studies scholars continue to see diplomacy as a recognized international institution defined by international conventions and laws that must be learned. Yet, because they are interested in teaching how systems change, they look beyond the official diplomatic corps to bring the tumult of international societies, and civil society acting transnationally, into sharper relief.

The changes brought by globalization and technology affect the practice of diplomacy itself. The hand of the State Department no longer controls the little handle on a zipper that binds separated entities one to another. The national interest is harder to determine and harder to pursue because corporations, NGOs and individuals work their politics across sovereign borders when necessary to achieve their objectives. They even carry their concerns to the United Nations and other multilateral institutions directly when thwarted domestically.

Because of this power diffusion within and among states, the international policy environment has experienced a sharp increase in participation by global actors who are not states; officials who are experts in matters other than diplomacy based outside of foreign ministries; and private citizens acting transnationally. Overlap, not separation, sets the context for modern diplomatic engagement. Multiple policy venues, parallel bodies and agreements, and thousands of international institutions create unending choice, if not chaos. These conditions require a "hairier," more intricate diplomatic process that resembles fastening the many hooks and loops of Velcro to get agreement rather than zipping together the official, sovereign teeth of old.

Some scholars, like The George Washington University's



Courtesy of Joe Johnson

Donna Oglesby speaks at the Nov. 12, 2013, forum, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: A Look to the Past, A Look to the Future," held at the Department of State.

Bruce Gregory, believe that diplomacy's public dimension has so intensified that public diplomacy is no longer a distinct function. He would merge the two roles to more effectively conduct a "new diplomacy" better adapted for the times. Because of their attention to the public dimension, the work of diplomacy studies scholars is well represented in the syllabi of practitioners teaching public diplomacy courses in American universities, as it is in those taught by affiliated academics.

Academics teach about multilateralism and conference diplomacy with actors whose expertise is not diplomacy. They highlight the diplomatic practices of small states and middle powers that approach the world as a collection of challenges that only a worldwide cooperative process can address. In their classrooms, academics note the whole-of-government global engagement that is shrinking the traditional primary role of foreign ministries around the world. They explore the expanding missions of domestic government agencies migrating abroad in response to complex problems that know no sovereign boundaries. Their courses also address the boundaries between global governance and diplomacy, asking pointedly who is a diplomat in today's world.

As one would expect, diplomatic studies scholars do teach

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theory. More surprising, perhaps, they also teach diplomatic practice by incorporating memoirs, case studies and comparative examination of the structures and processes of different states and regions in their syllabi. They consider the ethical dimension of diplomatic practice as well as diplomatic law. Some non-American practitioners, like the former ambassadors Kishan S. Rana (India), Jorge Heine (Chile) and Geoffrey Wiseman (Australia), are active diplomatic studies scholars. Their work is important in highlighting the differences in Western and non-Western diplomatic structures, processes and styles.

### The Tapestry of International Diplomacy

Academics take care in their texts and course design to illuminate non-Western diplomatic traditions and systems in order to highlight the Eurocentric principles of traditional diplomacy that many assume to be natural and universal. They separate out the American diplomatic style as only one of many to be studied and compared, and discuss the differing national negotiating styles.

Diplomacy studies scholars also speculate on the future of diplomacy. Some wonder if, among the possible futures, there might be a return to the rules of Westphalia—mutual non-interference, an emphasis on sovereignty and the formal equality of states—once rising powers like China and India gain power and influence.

This literature on diplomacy is essentially unknown to most FSOs teaching diplomacy. When I mentioned the names of prominent diplomacy studies scholars, such as Paul Sharp, Jan Melissen and Brian Hocking, during my interviews with practitioners, most did not recognize them. Similarly, with few exceptions, I got no reaction when I mentioned recent texts on diplomacy: *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practices* (2013), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (2013), or *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (2009).

This is neither surprising nor alarming. Although by design, the study of foreign policy has been excluded from the diplomacy studies paradigm since Harold Nicolson made the distinction between foreign policy and diplomacy in 1939, American

diplomats do not accept that distinction and do not employ it in their teaching. As master American practitioners, FSOs teach what they have experienced and know.

Whether American diplomats are outliers because of our particular political culture or because of our predominant power position in the world is a matter of debate. As American economic, political and military power wanes, however, the achievement of American foreign policy objectives will depend to a greater extent on Foreign Service professionals' knowledge and skills. Studying both the American diplomatic tradition and the evolving international diplomatic culture within which Americans must operate will be essential to succeed.

Keeping faith with the calling to serve the United States as a diplomat, in an era when Congress cannot manage to confirm career ambassadorial nominees for months on end, must be difficult. These prescient words of George F. Kennan, from 1961, might offer some solace: "Diplomacy is always going to consist to some extent of serving people who do not know that they are being served, who do not know that they need to be served, who misunderstand and occasionally abuse the very effort to serve."

A profession that stands still for its portrait in our rapidly changing world, however, runs the risk of becoming a still life. The times demand rededication to the quality of American diplomacy. Professional renewal requires continuing education in diplomacy, understood to be an international institution, a national practice and a set of expectations members of the international community have of one another.

Try as we might to avoid being in the world politically, working with others and having our objectives modified by them, the United States has no choice. Exceptional as we might be, we do not have the wherewithal to reweave global society on a universal loom we control. Nor can we pull our national threads out of the fabric of international society without unraveling the whole that serves our interest.

Consequently, we need to master diplomacy: the practice of sustaining official international relationships capable of withstanding vigorous political argument, even conflict, increasingly conducted in the public square. ■