

An Israeli lecturer in diplomacy shares his teaching philosophy with us.

Some Passing Thoughts on Teaching Diplomacy in University

by Yoav J. Tenenbaum

The following are some passing thoughts on teaching Diplomacy at academic level. These should be taken not as iron-clad laws, but as musings about a topic deserving attention. Indeed, this article reflects a deep conviction as to the singular importance of teaching in enhancing academic excellence. The pedagogic exercise in academia contributes no less to improving the quality of universities than the conduct of research and the publication of academic articles. Students, particularly in an academic discipline such as Diplomacy, can gain considerably from the contents and dynamics of the teaching experience. It is with this in mind that the following thoughts are conveyed in as brief and focused a manner as possible.

1. Stress the conceptual difference between the *Is* and the *Ought*. The students' attention should be drawn to the distinction between a descriptive and a prescriptive proposition.

What *is* reflects that which, according to the person advancing the proposition concerned, exists; what *ought to be*, represents that which he or she wished it existed. This seems to be obvious.

However, it is a common confusion that occurs among students in general, and students of Diplomacy, in particular. The distinction is not always drawn. Even academics tend to write in a manner that might, on occasion, lead to misunderstandings. Indeed, some theories of international relations are conveyed in a manner that does not always distinguish clearly and explicitly between the descriptive and the prescriptive. What is encouraging is that, once their attention is drawn to this confusion, students tend to realize themselves, when advancing a sentence in descriptive rather than a prescriptive vein, that they have made a conceptual mistake.

2. Do not tire of suggesting to students to express themselves, whether in writing or verbally, with sentences that are short, focused and clear (SFC). There are students who are capable, intelligent and



intellectually curious, but do not express themselves in a manner that would be either intelligible or coherent. Conveying a thought in a short, focused and clear manner is a much more difficult enterprise than may appear. It requires both *awareness* and *exercise*. For the student to be aware of the need to express a thought in this way (SFC), his or her attention ought to be drawn to it. Once the student concerned has become conscious of this need, he or she can proceed to endeavor to achieve the objective. It is a process which may last longer than most students may actually think. It entails practicing "live" over a long period of time, through many an examination and paper. The benefit to be accrued in later life to students of Diplomacy who have mastered the SFC is considerable, particularly if they were to pursue a diplomatic or academic career or indeed if they were to be engaged in diplomacy-related journalism.

3. Make clear to students that they can express any opinion they want provided it is backed up by facts, it is expressed in a coherent manner and has an inner, consistent logic to it. More often than not, one sees students wishing to share an opinion they entertain, believing that an academic setting is no different than a coffee shop in this regard. Well, it is not, and it ought not to be. An academic setting, as distinct from a coffee shop, should have unofficial rules to which students and lecturer must adhere to. Thus, students should feel free to express any opinion so long as such an opinion is not bereft of the conditions aforementioned. Students should be encouraged not to be timid, on the one hand, and yet to think in an intellectually disciplined vein, on the other hand. This is particularly important to anyone wishing to be engaged in diplomacy as a profession.

4. Allow students to express themselves in class without feeling any inhibition, apart from that which is related either to intellectual discipline or good taste. This is a tricky suggestion, to be sure. There are students who relish the opportunity to participate in class, to express an opinion, and make themselves known, so to speak, to the lecturer and to their fellow students. This is natural. A lecturer in Diplomacy ought to be patient and empathic. A relaxed atmosphere ought to be created to allow students the freedom to express themselves. A student can always be asked, in a friendly manner, to postpone his or her comment. The students, as a group, have to feel that their participation is not a nuisance, but rather an integral part of the intellectual exercise which involves the lecturer as imparting knowledge and analysis and the students as conveying question marks and thought-provoking comments. The lecturer should not be an educator. His or her task is not to control the mode of conduct of the students, but rather to discipline their mode of thinking. The lecturer must display authority without imposing a rigid setting. Encouraging thought and discussion is not a privilege bestowed on students, but an incentive aimed at enhancing intellectual curiosity.

5. Acknowledging that a student can, on occasion, stimulate in the

lecturer second-thoughts and even a revision of previously-held opinions is no sign of weakness, nor is it a perilous admission that might lead such a student to adopt an arrogant attitude. Indeed, if done correctly, it can encourage a student to maintain a high degree of excellence. Modesty is taught by showing the richness of the academic discipline and the almost unlimited intellectual landscape that students have yet to traverse. Indeed, a student of Diplomacy should be encouraged to be conceptually creative while being intellectually modest.

6. When dwelling on decision-makers or diplomats, students should be asked to delve beyond public pronouncements on the factors motivating their actions. In this respect, diplomatic historians have an advantage. A diplomatic historian who has conducted research has more often than not discovered that a public pronouncement by a decision-maker or a diplomat may not necessarily reflect the real motives prompting the adoption of a certain policy. This is not to say that students should be taught to be invariably cynical about public statements issued by them. Indeed, not only as regards their public statements, a certain degree of empathy ought to be displayed towards decision-makers and diplomats. In order to understand them and the motives prompting their deeds, an empathic attitude is necessary. Students must be taught that it is possible to be empathic and yet critical. One can try to understand a decision-maker or a diplomat and then judge him or her adversely. The combination of empathy and criticism is not as clear to the students as it may seem. This has to be taught and discussed. The importance of teaching to be empathic, even while critical, cannot be overemphasized to a student of Diplomacy.

7. Students must understand that an important intellectual input can be introduced with a question mark at the end, rather than with an exclamation mark. In other words, a contribution can be made to the study of Diplomacy by raising a thought-provoking question no less than by providing a correct answer. Sometimes one can be impressed by questions raised by intellectually curious students. It is vital to stress to students that a query can open up the gates to discovery. Students must be aware that, even when asked a question, they may answer back with a question. After all, one of the main driving forces of a successful diplomat is curiosity. In this regard, curiosity has to be distinguished from gossip: the first is aimed at broadening the intellectual horizon; the latter reflects a desire to peep into other people's lives.

8. Students should also be taught that doubting is no vice so long as it does not paralyze the decision-making process. Doubt may reflect conscience. Doubt may denote ignorance of pertinent facts. It can become a useful tool against undue haste. Indeed, it can prompt a needed re-examination of previously-held beliefs. In short, doubt, in certain instances, exercised in moderation, could be a virtue, and ought to be taught as such to students of Diplomacy.

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