

Training International Public Relations Teams: Active Learning in a Multinational Context

Bond Benton, Montclair State University

From 2004-2014, the State Department conducted a series of trainings for local, non-United States staff tasked with public diplomacy projects. These projects focused on activities that would better tell the U.S. story to international audiences and highlight attractive aspects of U.S. culture to external constituencies. Given the applied nature of these projects, training organizers elected to use an active and applied learning approach for training design. Non-U.S. staff worked directly on real world public diplomacy projects as the primary focus of each training session. Training groups' composition included both homogeneous groups (with participants all from the same country) and heterogeneous groups (with participants coming from multiple countries). Measured training outcomes demonstrated the effectiveness of applied learning in this context and improved outcomes for heterogeneous groups. Implications for teaching public relations, public diplomacy, and training pedagogy are considered.

Keywords: State Department, strategic communication, experiential learning, training and development, public diplomacy, diversity

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Strategically communicating with an international constituency presents a challenge under the most ideal circumstances. Reaching an international audience primed to believe the message is imperialistic, hostile, dangerous, hateful, and untrustworthy (Sardar & Davis, 2002) presents a considerably more substantial obstacle. That, however, is the exact obstacle the United States State Department took on in efforts to improve U.S. perceptions in the world through improved public diplomacy. Public diplomacy relies on a multidisciplinary approach that integrates ideas from marketing, public relations, international relations, and cultural studies (Botan, 1997). Turning this approach into an actionable strategy necessarily relies on trained teams with knowledge of both the state they are representing and the constituencies they are addressing. In this case, the State Department was tasked with training teams to deliver key messages at consular and diplomatic posts throughout the world from 2004-2014. As this message would need local partners to navigate and adapt the approach to the conditions on the ground, teams were composed of non-U.S. citizens who work for the U.S. State Department. The unique focus of this training, coupled with the opportunity to study the impact of multinational training groups focused on public relations, provides an important contextual opportunity for research that has implications for both educators and public relations practitioners.

Literature Review

Public Diplomacy and the U.S. State Department

Public diplomacy is based on the idea that states have fundamentally attractive dimensions that can be leveraged in the creation of improved relationships with a variety of international stakeholders (Sevin et al., 2019). An improved national image can lead to greater trade opportunities, more tourism, better positioning in international negotiations, and a decrease in international acrimony, potentially

resulting in improved security and more favorable economic conditions. The public relations element of public diplomacy has been well-established. Dating back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, states have regularly attempted to win over the publics of other nations by highlighting cultural and political characteristics that might be viewed as attractive to an international audience. While writing about the public relations dimension of public diplomacy, Sun (2008) argues that “American soft power has great influence worldwide from Hollywood stars to Harvard education, and through Microsoft applications” (p. 167).

The positive association with the economic and cultural dimensions of a country, if nourished through a program of public diplomacy, can “maintain and enhance long-term political relationships at a profit for society, so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organizations involved are met” (Sun, 2008, p. 168). Positive perceptions of a state can then serve as a buttress against negative attitudes directed against that state (Nye, 2004). A corporate social responsibility corollary is the investment that companies make “in areas like cause-related marketing to improve their reputation and create goodwill among consumers in the host country” (Choi et al., 2016, p. 82). In fact, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) argue that “public relations and public diplomacy seek similar objectives and use similar tools” (p. 137). The challenge, however, of public diplomacy mirrors the challenges faced in international public relations, which are well documented by both practitioners and researchers. As Taylor and Brodowsky (2012) note:

For the past three decades, increasing numbers of firms, at an increasing rate, have adopted a global mindset. Growth, if not survival, depends upon making the right decisions with respect to the international environment. (p. 149)

Taylor and Brodowsky (2012) further explain “there is widespread acceptance of the fallacy that IMR [international marketing research]

can use the same approaches, theories, methods, and scales in different worldwide locations” (p. 150). The idea that a successful messaging approach in one location will work equally well in another has been regularly shown to be a dubious thesis (Cheon et al., 2007). To remedy the dangers of an insular and homogeneous perspective in international messaging, the State Department regularly draws upon the perspectives of non-U.S. citizens employed by the organization when conducting public diplomacy. Non-U.S. citizens working at State Department posts comprise the bulk of the 42,000 staff members who work at more than 250 U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide. The term used in State Department literature describes them as the “glue” that holds U.S. diplomatic posts together (Bureau of Human Resources, 2007). As the “glue” of the organization, these international employees offer logistical bridges between the diplomatic post and region as many U.S. staff do not have the local cultural or language experience to create functioning programs in their posted countries (Asthana, 2006). Officials from the United States are assigned to a post for three years or less (and often for a much shorter duration than that). The job of U.S. diplomats posted overseas mirrors the expectations that many organizations face when operating internationally. They need to be sensitive to the needs of the local population, while ensuring the policies they enact match the overall vision Washington has for diplomacy. This need for adaptation to stakeholder needs while maintaining message consistency is echoed in literature defining the linkages between public diplomacy and public relations. In Vanc and Fitzpatrick’s (2016) analysis of public relations scholarship on the subject of public diplomacy from 1990 to 2014, they note that “studies examining the strategic aspects of public diplomacy, including works on media and messaging, revealed both commonalities in the two fields” (p. 436).

In terms of public diplomacy, the United States’ agenda is broadly to win the “hearts and minds” of people throughout the world.

This became an acutely difficult objective to achieve in the early 2000s when worldwide public opinion against the United States was sharply negative in the context of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The extent of those negative attitudes was crystallized in a study issued by the U.S. State Department, which was delivered to the House Appropriations Committee in 2003:

The bottom has indeed fallen out of support for the United States. In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, only 15 percent view the United States favorably, compared with 61 percent in early 2002. In Saudi Arabia, according to a Gallup poll, only 7 percent had a “very favorable” view of the U.S. while 49 percent had a “very unfavorable” view. In Turkey, a secular Muslim, non-Arab democracy that is a stalwart member of NATO and a longtime supporter of America, favorable opinion toward the U.S. dropped from 52 percent three years ago to 15 percent in the spring of 2003, according to the Pew Research Center. The problem is not limited to the Arab and Muslim world. In Spain, an early ally in the war in Iraq, 3 percent had a very favorable view of the United States while 39 percent had a very unfavorable view. (Djerejian, 2003, p. 19)

The longevity of these negative feelings was further validated in both academic and popular research. For example, Bellamy and Weinberg (2008) noted that over a five-year span in the 2000s, the percentage of people with a favorable image of the United States decreased 11% in Japan, 18% in Argentina, 30% in Germany, and only reached 51% in the U.K. (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008, p. 55). Such low numbers represented a diplomatic liability extreme enough that popular sentiment against the United States could be a hindrance in conducting foreign policy. Thus, the call to speak to the needs of key global stakeholders in appropriate

language and substance was paramount. The leveraging of opportunities created by the U.S. State Department's sizable non-U.S. citizen workforce would necessarily need to be a key component of any such initiative. With this in mind, the State Department issued an open solicitation to create a training program for its staff of non-U.S. citizens in 2004. This multi-year training program would focus on developing strategies for localized programs and presentations that highlight attractive aspects of United States culture to key international publics.

In this context, the key role of non-U.S. staff would be that of an enabler and intercessory. Their primary approach to communicating U.S. messages to local populations must be consistent with Washington's goals but adapted to match the needs of local targets. Managing messages and evaluating locally appropriate channels are the key components of their work. The term "engagement" has gained much traction as a public relations concept as the idea that "stakeholders challenge the discourse of organizational primacy and organizations prioritize the need for authentic stakeholder involvement" (Johnston, 2014, p. 381). This emphasis on dialogue, where the motivations of local constituencies are reciprocal in messaging, mirrors much of the literature about the goals governmental organizations have when initiating public diplomacy (Leonard et al., 2002; Nye, 1990, 2002b, 2002a, 2004, 2008, 2009). While such activities may appear insignificant in something as massive as a state's foreign policy program, the relationships built with publics in foreign countries can have a significant overall effect on the perceptions of that country. International staff working for the U.S. State Department can improve local constituency access in a number of ways. These include access to the local media channels, links to relevant programs and publics in the community, an understanding of local and regional government processes, and the skills to conduct research in a culturally appropriate and effective way. These international partners also have credibility in helping to share

the American messages in a way more likely to be accepted in the region.

While the opportunities provided by local resources are clear in any public relations strategy, efforts at effective public diplomacy have been sharply criticized for their failure to adapt to the needs of various international constituencies. Undoubtedly, some of the shortcomings are circumstantial. U.S. foreign policy decisions are frequently not well received by a number of publics worldwide. As the old saying goes, you can't PR your way out of a product people hate. Echoing this sentiment, an internal study commissioned by the State Department (Djerejian, 2003) argued:

We must underscore the common ground in both our values and policies. We have failed to listen and failed to persuade. We have not taken the time to understand our audience, and we have not bothered to help them understand us. We cannot afford such shortcomings. (p. 24)

Given the constraints of the short posting periods for U.S. officials, it is not feasible for them to form the partnerships essential to key public relations tasks. As such, the bulk of stakeholder relationship building is contingent on the work of local, non-U.S. staff. This creates organizational tension, as message creation is clearly under the domain of U.S. State Department employees, but adaptation and delivery of the message is sourced to local teams. This tendency has been identified in the Ethnocentric, Polycentric, Regiocentric, and Geocentric (E.P.R.G.) schema, which demonstrates that organizations engaging with international constituencies will typically have a reflexive tendency to contextualize the processes of the country they are operating in with the processes of their home country (Mahmoud, 1975). Wind et al. (1973) describe this as the "ethnocentric phase" (p. 14) of international messaging. Moving beyond this phase is particularly challenging, as Molleda et al. (2015) note that "organizations with operations in more than

one country are confronted with differences in geography, culture, politics, economy, communication, and demands for transparency that make finding an appropriate balance difficult” (p. 335).

While many modern international operations have moved beyond this phase, State Department culture tends to be considerably more traditional and remains grounded in U.S. organizational preferences. The State Department is hardly alone in this tendency as multinationals regularly emphasize their home countries’ cultures. As Samaha et al. (2014) indicate, “Despite the increase in international relationships, managers and academics have little guidance regarding whether or how strategies should be adapted in different countries” (p. 78). This is reflected in substantial public relations literature that suggests the field remains quite homogeneous despite the increasing need for messaging to diverse audiences (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). U.S. models and preferences still dominate public relations practice even in a global context (Freitag & Stokes, 2009). Diversification of the perspectives of public relations should be embedded in education and training, but shortcomings in this area remain. As Sriramesh (2002) succinctly states:

Public relations (PR) education has not kept pace with the rapid globalization The existing PR body of knowledge, and PR curricula around the world, have a US bias. In order to prepare PR students in various parts of the world to become effective multicultural professionals it is essential for experiences and perspectives from other continents to be integrated into PR education. (p. 54)

For the State Department, some of this inward focus is institutional, but much of it is structural as well. The focus of the organization is ensuring that its staff remains on message in terms of mandates coming from a central leadership. At the same time, however, for messages to gain currency with targeted stakeholders, the message must be localized by

teams of people who are not from the United States. Verčič et al. (2015) argue for improved training for international public relations teams by companies, which:

have to establish international training initiatives for communicators as well as an international selection process for communication staff, encourage international exchange of best practices and creative approaches, in corporate communications between countries, regions, as well as divisions and functions, and establish a visible international communication performance within the company. (p. 791)

Adult Learning and Public Relations Training

Active and experiential learning in public relations, marketing, and strategic communication training has been recognized as fundamental for successful outcomes (Alam, 2014; Bove & Davies, 2009; Craciun & Corrigan, 2010; Laverie et al., 2008). This need is seen in trainees at all levels but appears to be particularly salient in the case of adult learners. Specifically, prior research on adult learners has shown a preference for immediacy and the opportunity to have training sessions directly inform work in which they are currently engaged (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). While learners in traditional college classrooms might be more willing to see learning as exploratory towards an eventual professional outcome, most professionals in a training session do not have the luxury of time. Additionally, adult learners typically bring professional experience to the training environment and look to utilize existing skills and prior knowledge in learning activities (Luke, 1971). While courses geared to university students frequently emphasize making challenging concepts accessible, the accessibility of adult learning frequently comes from contextualizing new knowledge with previous experience. Content ownership is important in training working adults, as participants want to feel a sense of authorship in the material that emerges from the

training session (American Management Association, 1993). While periods of extended reflection and reinforcement are features of the university classroom, adult learners generally prefer action items they can immediately apply and refine through implementation in professional activities. The importance of this approach for a population engaged in international public relations practice becomes clear when considering many of the key challenges of the field.

Consistently, the most pedagogically sound way to navigate these challenges has been through active engagement and application activities on the part of training participants (American Management Association, 1993; Knowles et al., 1998; Luke, 1971). Contextual reflection and differentiation appear to be the most successful approaches to encouraging learners to consider different ideas related to international climates and the corresponding challenges related to culture that may emerge. While important theoretical lessons might be imparted through traditional lectures, the decision-making required to apply those principles requires dialogue, reflection, application, and activity (Hollensen, 2011). In a global context, diversity would appear to support these sorts of active learning outcomes. Multinational learning groups have been found to stimulate curiosity and foster a creative climate of collaboration among participants (Boehm et al., 2010; Fine-Davis & Faas, 2014). Specifically, culturally heterogeneous groups appear to have advantages over homogeneous groups in that they tend to foster less insular thinking and encourage consideration of new perspectives (Jacobi, 2018; Tyran, 2017). Diversity in training groups is seen as a particularly salient need for public relations (Verčič et al., 2015).

Given the State Department's need for effective public diplomacy training and the specific needs of adult learners, the following research question emerged:

RQ1: What is the effect of active and experiential public relations training

among non-U.S. citizens working for the U.S. State Department?

As cultural diversity would seem to support effective active and experiential learning, investigating diversity in training group composition begs the following research question:

RQ2: What are the differences in training outcomes between culturally homogeneous groups and culturally heterogeneous groups of non-U.S. citizens engaged in public relations training for the U.S. State Department?

Method

Case Context

The situation the State Department faced in terms of global attitudes toward the United States presented an obstacle with non-U.S. staff serving as an opportunity for shifting the worldwide narrative toward attractive aspects of U.S. culture. As an organization, tensions existed between the necessity for message consistency and the need for localization of communication. Navigation of that tension to ensure the preferences of different global publics were respected was the responsibility of non-U.S. staff working within the institution. Moving the needle in terms of worldwide opinion of the United States was a key objective that would require creative, compelling, and well-researched communication tactics. To ensure that non-U.S. staff would be empowered to develop those tactics, effective staff training was a crucial component of this initiative.

Training Approach

With world attitudes towards the United States being an important focal point of the institution, the U.S. State Department made improving the communication skills of its international staff an area of emphasis. With that in mind, the 2004 solicitation issued by the State Department focused on skills-based training that would improve the ability of non-U.S. staff to define the attributes of local stakeholders and tailor the messages to appeal to local preferences. These local staff were tasked with creating

a positive image of the United States in their countries in the hopes of accruing a range of public diplomacy benefits. As public diplomacy is intrinsically connected to public relations (Corman et al., 2008), consideration of effective public relations teaching methods was top of mind when constructing the training program for the local staff. Training these teams to ensure they could deliver a consistent message with appropriate localization was clearly a key component of this initiative. Given the distinct population associated with these trainings and the outcomes sought, a unique context for teaching public relations emerged.

In reviewing the mandates and circumstances outlined in the solicitation, it was clear that an approach emphasizing active and applied learning would be crucial for successfully training this population. In response to these exigencies, an approach focused on application-based learning of public relations principles served as a foundational direction in the proposal. The State Department found this approach to be most salient, and the proposal was accepted. As such, this case presented opportunities to test the viability of an applied experiential approach to public relations training in an international context.

Training Structure

Based on both the existing research and the needs of this specific group of adult learners, the training structure emphasized application-based active learning that leveraged the participants' experience. This approach was operationalized in the proposal in several key ways. First, project-based scenarios tailored to the learners' immediate needs would be built. Rather than teaching general theories and concepts related to public relations, participants would be tasked with assessing the values, interests, needs, and preferences of the countries in which they were working. They would also need to identify their organization's overall objectives in the region and begin preliminary work on a strategy and set of tactics that would best meet those objectives. The character of the training would then

turn those ideas into direct action plans with ideas for implementation. Thus, the training sessions would move away from lectures and speeches and would take on the character of a workshop. Participants would solve their own problems and collaborate with one another, with the facilitator offering guidance based on research related to public relations.

The Regional Program Office headquartered in Vienna, Austria, directed this training project. Upon acceptance of the proposal, training organizers immediately scheduled a series of fact-finding sessions focused on identifying State Department needs and outcomes sought. The role that improved public relations could have in achieving key objectives was also considered. These sessions proved immensely helpful as much was discovered about the circumstances of local staff tasked with communicating on behalf of the United States. Many of the unique challenges they face also came to light. As noted, short duration postings for officials from the United States frequently made international staff the public face of the organization for their community and, by extension, the U.S. government.

Having identified key challenges and opportunities that would be the focus of the training, developing specific training structures followed. The structure of each session was based directly on best practices related to active and experiential learning of public relations. Robust scholarship supports this approach, particularly Kolb's (1984) frequently utilized work on the subject (cited in Herz & Merz, 1998). This approach emphasizes learning by doing and is increasingly a staple of pedagogic methodologies in a range of public relations courses at universities:

Experiential learning exercises help students to confront problems; make decisions; understand conflict resolution; evaluate feedback; understand negotiation and bargaining and recognize, and perhaps change their attitudes . . . this offers an opportunity to interact with the real business world bringing

relevance and currency. (Alam, 2014, p. 117)

This is particularly important for an audience of working adults because the emphasis on utilizing experience and providing content for immediate application is crucial to meeting their needs (American Management Association, 1993; Knowles et al., 1998; Luke, 1971). To ensure the training sessions met this standard and served the needs of participants, a pre-seminar questionnaire was distributed to all attendees. This survey requested that participants evaluate the specific needs of the community they would be attempting to reach, along with an assessment of the outcomes that were being sought in terms of reaching key stakeholders. From this, participants were tasked with coming up with an overall strategy and possible tactics that would be part of that strategy. While participant proposals would be refined in training sessions, the pre-seminar questionnaire required developed answers and research related to the following questions:

- What goals does your post have for specific communities in the area that you serve?
- Looking at the goals, what do people in those communities like about the United States? (NOTE: It could be anything from music to clothes to movies to brands).
- What sorts of events and activities could your post do to showcase those areas of interest to people in the targeted community?
- How would these activities reinforce the positive feelings that the community has towards certain aspects of U.S. culture?

Seminar sessions were organized according to each area with creative participation among diverse practitioners framing the text of the training, as prescribed by Verčič et al. (2015). Sessions focused on the first “goals” bullet point would include an overview of the importance of establishing goals and objectives from the facilitator. The bulk of the session, however, would be collaborative sharing from participants about

the outcomes they have been tasked with achieving by their post. The “what do people like about the United States” item opens the door for sessions on audience analysis and the importance of understanding the attitudes and beliefs of a targeted public. Again, collaboration on this point is immensely important as seeing the distinctions between various publics is foundational for adaptation. The “events and activities” item would lead to sessions on the importance of tactics as instrumental activities that support goals and objectives. In this session, participant brainstorming about tactics in a safe space allows for creativity from multiple perspectives. The seminar was designed as an application-based endeavor with participants working with one another to develop, refine, and improve these plans with the guidance and direction of a facilitator, rather than a prescriber.

While this research represents an investigation into learner experience in a public relations training project, it could also be more broadly contextualized as an investigation into a specific case. As staff training was an essential component of U.S. State Department public diplomacy efforts, exploring that training from a case perspective provides heuristic value (Yin, 2013). Moreover, case studies have been recommended as a necessity in understanding the interplay between the activities of individuals within an organization and the effects of those activities on institutional outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2009). Training serves directive and creative functions in explaining individual activities within an organization, with organizational initiatives being better understood as an amalgamation of individual actions (Thompson, 2018). Thus, exploring public diplomacy training in the U.S. State Department functionally serves as an investigation of public relations pedagogy while providing a richer understanding of public diplomacy efforts overall. Assessment of outcomes is based on survey responses related to training effectiveness, coupled with qualitative inclusion of narrative statements

from participants detailing their experiences. As training sessions occurred in multiple contexts, results are compared based on group composition. Culturally homogeneous group results are compared with culturally mixed, heterogeneous group results.

Population and Assessment Survey

All training sessions consisted entirely of international staff employed by the U.S. State Department. These staff members were engaged in public relations and communication related activities on behalf of the United States. As the State Department mandated consistency, the structure of each course was standardized, meaning that, insofar as possible, the experience of each participant in each context would be reasonably similar to all other participants. Upon completing the course, participants were required to complete a survey that measured their overall experience and also an evaluation of how learning would allow them to meet key outcomes related to public relations. These measures were constructed by the State Department and were required for use in the course evaluation. This survey was developed by the State Department to ensure the investment in training produced a return in terms of participant outcomes. These State Department measures offer meaningful insights into the perceived outcomes learners experienced.

Participants responded to a four point, Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Assessed items on the scale included understandability, interest stimulated in course content, active participation, and the overall benefit sessions offered for future public diplomacy projects. Space was also provided for narrative responses where participants could directly share experiences in the training sessions.

Follow-up with participants and external observation of courses have consistently shown the survey to be useful for training outcome assessment (B. Pressler, personal communication, July 10, 2010).

Performance assessment, external observation, narrative responses, and review of the training sessions further validated the outcomes identified by participants in the questionnaire.

Group Composition Comparison

The training sessions' organization would also allow for an analysis of the effectiveness of public relations training in culturally heterogeneous versus culturally homogeneous groups. Specifically, several of the training sessions were slated to occur at a regional training office in Vienna. Participants for these sessions came from all over the world and collaborated on their respective projects together. Other sessions, however, occurred onsite in specific countries. The participants in these sessions all came from the same country. The opportunity to investigate the effectiveness of public relations training by comparing the outcomes of mixed, heterogeneous versus homogeneous groups was particularly compelling. It also offered the chance to evaluate how active and experiential learning strategies might be affected by group composition. This project provided a unique opportunity to explore how multinational groups of adult learners navigate public relations challenges in the training context.

There were two distinct contexts in which these courses were delivered with seven total sessions for this project. All sessions occurred from 2004 to 2014. Four of these sessions were delivered to participants at a regional training center in Vienna. The 48 trainees at these sessions came from different nations, as described in Table 1.

The other three sessions occurred at American Embassies in the following nations: Baku, Azerbaijan; Vienna, Austria; and Yerevan, Armenia. The 37 trainees in these sessions were all citizens of the respective country in which the training took place.

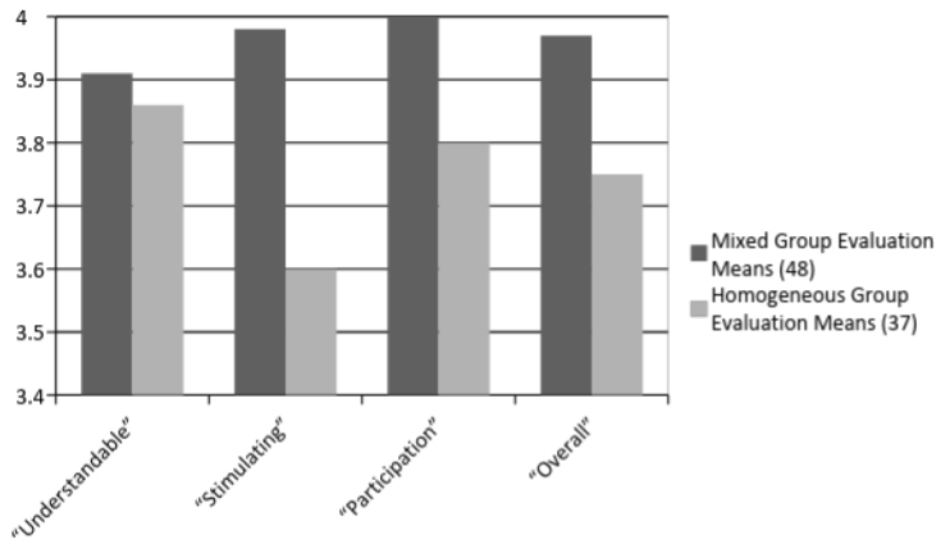
Table 1

Nationalities: Training Site Participants who Came to Vienna

Africa	Europe
Madagascar	Albania
Mauritania	Austria
Mauritius	Belarus
South Africa	Belgium
	Bosnia
Asia	Bulgaria
Nepal	Croatia
Pakistan	Finland
Qatar	Georgia
Russia	Germany
South Korea	Iceland
Turkey	Moldova
Ukraine	Netherlands
	Portugal
North America	South America
Dominican Republic	Chile

Results

In investigating the research question “What is the effect of active and experiential public relations training among non-U.S. citizens working for the U.S. State Department?”, it was expected that course participants would report general satisfaction with training outcomes. Research suggested the use of active, experiential, and applied pedagogy would be especially beneficial for this group of learners, and participant response supports such an approach. The mean scores from both groups on all assessed areas suggest general acceptance and appreciation for the training format. With a 4 indicating strong agreement with the perceived success of each area, the fact that the mean score of all participants approached 4 suggests the training was successful in fostering understandability, stimulation towards course content, active participation, and overall benefit for public diplomacy projects (see Table 2).

Table 2*Group Means*

Several open-ended responses from participants reflect appreciation for the active and experiential approach of the training:

"I liked how we worked directly on items that I'm dealing with at my post. I can see how this will help when I return to work right away."

"This was great! We had so much freedom and the facilitator really worked with us to figure out solutions to the problems we'd been having."

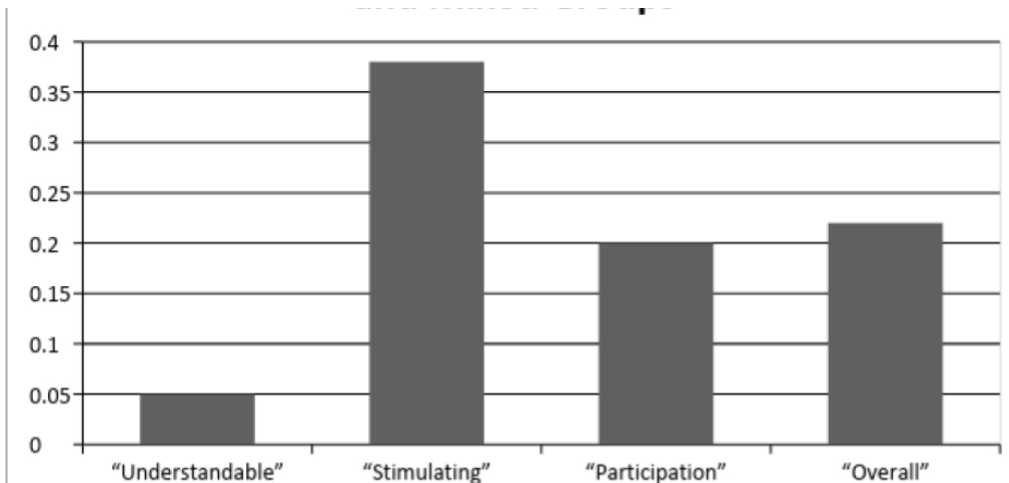
"This wasn't a lecture or a class, which I appreciated. They listened to me and let us work with each other."

Based on the literature that strongly supports active and experiential learning (especially considering the needs of adult learners focused on public relations), training outcomes should show that greater diversity in group composition would foster improved course satisfaction overall. To investigate the research question "What are the differences in

training outcomes between culturally homogeneous groups and mixed, heterogeneous groups of non-U.S. citizens engaged in public relations training for U.S. State Department?”, the difference between the means of mixed, heterogeneous groups versus homogeneous groups was calculated, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Evaluation Differences in Mixed vs. Homogeneous Groups: Mean Comparison



The “understandability” item was the only assessed area where the mixed nationality group did not clearly report higher outcomes than their homogeneous group counterparts. There are many viable explanations for this, including the fact that both groups scored quite high on this assessed item. Understandability also deals primarily with comprehension, rather than other measures that deal with creativity and development. In contrast, the area of greatest difference was in the stimulation offered by the content of the course. Those in the heterogeneous groups rated the stimulation received from the training at a 3.98 on a 4-point scale, while those in the homogeneous groups rated stimulation at 3.59. Experiential learning in public relations courses “requires that students draw on their direct

experiences to reflect, test, and create new ideas“ (Munoz & Huser, 2008, p. 215) and group diversity appears to enhance these areas. At an intuitive level, a group with more diversity would naturally have more rewarding and diverse experiences to share. The creative dimension of experiential learning also appeared to be enhanced by having a range of unique and differing perspectives present. Participant-reported training outcomes appear to have benefited by the presence of diversity in the training group. Narrative comments from participants in heterogeneous groups also reflect this:

“I learned so much from my colleagues from all over the world. It was great to hear they are facing many of the same issues as us.”

“Meeting people from all over was my favorite part of the course. They do some different things and we will totally look into trying them at our post.”

“I love my colleagues from around the globe!!!!”

“This was such a wonderful training and I will for sure be staying in contact with the people I met here. Great friends and we get so much from talking to each other.”

An example of an outcome produced by these activities emerged from German training participants tasked with youth outreach by the U.S. embassy in Berlin. Leaders at the embassy had also expressed interest in improving relationships with the large Turkish diaspora in the country. From the pre-seminar survey, the participants suggested programming that would appeal to both German and Turkish youth. Working on this approach at the seminar, participants identified research that showed German and Turkish youth had a particular interest in American hip-hop music. During seminar sessions, the German participants were able to build a series of events featuring American, German, and Turkish hip-hop artists who would appeal to the targeted demographic. Lauded by State

Department officials, the approach was seen positively as mirroring Cold War era public diplomacy:

The State Department's program is modeled on the jazz diplomacy that the U.S. government conducted during the Cold War by sending integrated bands led by Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to counter Soviet propaganda and instead promote "the American way of life." (Aidi, 2014)

Such examples offer insight into the focus of the training sessions, where the bulk of the course was guided by management of tangible, real world public relations challenges, rather than lectures and directives from the facilitator.

Discussion

Diversity and Active Learning

The results broadly support the effectiveness of experiential and active learning strategies. Initially, this reinforces the rationale for such an approach for groups working on projects related to international messaging. In this instance, the application-based structure seemed ideal to a staff of non-U.S. citizens tasked with public relations initiatives by the U.S. State Department. The role they play in public diplomacy programs for the U.S. State Department has been well-established, and training outcomes like these speak to strategies on improving the training and preparation that goes into such initiatives. The creation of groups that were diverse in terms of nationality did not, in any way, compromise the overall effectiveness of active learning (Chang, 2009) and likely offered unique benefits that made the applied piece of the training more effective. This suggests an approach to international public relations teams' composition should likely attempt to ensure diversity of cultural backgrounds for such teams. As indicated, an organization that truly embraces international opportunities will integrate the perspectives of constituents from

throughout the world and create a vision for successful communication that transcends the limited perspective of a single group (Mahmoud, 1975; Wind et al., 1973). The composition of groups tasked with international public relations projects and the corresponding training they receive is an important element of this optimization.

The results of this project also reinforce the importance of facilitating diversity in the public relations classroom. As public relations, like all fields, continues to globalize its scope, educators would do well to create spaces of international engagement in their courses. Doing so supports the professional development of students who will be practitioners in a multinational environment. The feedback from this particular case would suggest that learning overall would be enhanced when public relations students learn through engagement with diversity.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this research are promising, yet key limitations should be acknowledged in the context of discussing this project's broader significance. Initially, the group being investigated was relatively small in size and highly specialized in terms of their needs. Non-U.S. citizens working for the U.S. State Department are distinct and tasked with a very specific form of public relations. Making more general assumptions about a larger population could prove problematic when thinking about the specialized nature of this group. While the training was intense and direct in its focus on applied experiential learning, the courses themselves were quite short (lasting only a matter of days). Whether or not this approach could be applied to sustained training and development done by an organization is something that needs additional investigation. Similarly, university public relations courses and programs with durations lasting semesters and years may face challenges when using a primarily experiential approach. Comparing this to previous research on experiential learning done in undergraduate courses is worthwhile, though the

comparison likely would not be a direct one.

Beyond items related to generalizability, there are broader issues with using this case to make assessments of experiential learning for adults in a training context. The population studied here was composed of many nationalities, yet it should be noted that these participants shared an important commonality: they all chose to work for the U.S. government. The decision made to seek employment at a U.S. institution is indicative of potential distinction from other citizens in the country in which one resides. Categorization of people from the same country as “homogeneous” is also potentially problematic, as subcultures within a state can indicate profound areas of difference despite shared nationality (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, in this study, satisfaction still appeared to be enhanced in groups composed of different nationalities. It appears, at least in this context, that internationalization of a training group led to better outcomes in terms of active experiential learning. Whatever similarities may exist in the people who participated in these sessions, it remains clear that there were tangible benefits based on the cultural diversity of the groups. When thinking about both the teaching of international messaging and the practice of public relations, the results suggest that heterogeneity can be the basis for higher levels of creativity and collaboration.

Finally, favorable post-training self-assessments suggest but fail to confirm positive training outcomes. Participant reporting is notoriously tricky when evaluating the success of any teaching or training initiative. People participating in a course may feel that they have learned a great deal only to ignore what they learned when that information is applied to field projects. It is also possible that, despite what they have learned, the reality of the situation they face on the job may not match the content explored in a course. While it is heartening that participants viewed the training as understandable, stimulating, engaging, and beneficial, any

declaration of the training's long-term success would involve a more longitudinal evaluation that assesses not only the direct outcomes of the training, but the direct outcomes of the lessons learned from the training, as well.

Conclusion

The results explored show promise for the use of experiential learning as an approach for public relations training and validate the importance of building international teams with an eye towards cultural diversity in terms of composition. This alone, however, does not fully speak to the experiences members had in the training context. A participant from the Dominican Republic discussed ways in which the embassy's substantial library resources could be more effectively utilized by nearby schools. A participant from Belarus focused on programs that could make democratic ideals attractive to the population under the constraints of an autocratic regime. Another participant from Turkey worked on promotional materials for a series of American film screenings that the embassy would sponsor in a country that remains fascinated by U.S. culture. By working on these projects directly in the training, participants were given the opportunity to receive immediate feedback. Rather than receiving lectures that they might be able to apply to their work, the content of the seminar functionally became their work. This is the sort of application-based learning that employees engaging in training prefer.

Application to Other Public Relations Instruction Contexts

Broadly considering public relations instruction overall, a learning-by-doing orientation appears to be more effective in meeting learner needs. Of particular note in this case, it appears that these projects were served by the diversity of the participants who were present. International messaging involves the building of complex relationships across a matrix of cultural influences (Samaha et al., 2014). The ability to adapt cannot

be facilitated in a vacuum. The presence of a culturally diverse group enhances the ability of that group to manage cultural variables in public relations practice.

More broadly, the effectiveness of such programs in meeting U.S. State Department goals for moderating the opinions and actions of global constituencies is less clear. Well-intentioned programs may attract interest from prospective stakeholders, but sustaining that interest and leveraging it into action is a considerably more difficult proposition. There is also the unique space of public relations that public diplomacy occupies. Intrinsically, public diplomacy is a public relations proposition (Sun, 2008). However, when the strategic element of public diplomacy is transparent to the individuals targeted, its effectiveness risks being compromised. As Schneider (2006) notes, “This should be a process of building bridges, not a one-way street. Developing respect for others and their way of thinking—this is what cultural diplomacy does” (p. 192).

Challenges like these are not easily navigated, and platitudes about public relations will do little in helping practitioners overcome them. Based on this research, the most productive approach would be transitioning from abstraction to action and ensuring that those tasked with speaking to global audiences have a correspondingly global team.

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