



## Cultural Relations: an idea whose time has come

by Graham Leicester <sup>1</sup>

I believe that the skilled practice of 'cultural relations' is a core competence for the 21st century. That belief stems from a reading of the world as messy, complex, fast-changing and global. Cultures - by which I mean the patterns of shared expression that make us human<sup>2</sup> - are in flux or in crisis. Identities are confused and threatened. As a concerned citizen of Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, once told me: 'we are all struggling to find our roots in this storm'.

We live in a global age, one world with many cultures. Those cultures can clash, as Samuel Huntington suggested in the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Or they can dance together. But they can no longer grow and thrive in isolation.

This is a new context. We need to extend how we think about 'cultural relations' to rise to the contemporary challenge.

### The Role of Cultural Relations

There is already a lively contemporary debate about the need to upgrade our international practice to tackle the global issues of the 21st century. My impression is that cultural relations is in danger of being absorbed, or even eclipsed, in these discussions by the more recent concept of 'public diplomacy' - even in the British Council's own publications.

The British Council has been using an [International Relations Positioning Spectrum](#) - running from giving at one end, through helping, sharing, boasting and shouting to fighting at the other - to highlight the subtle and important role of cultural relations. But *Options for Influence*, a report by Counterpoint, the British Council's own think tank, exploring 'the new worlds of public diplomacy' claims all of this territory short of military action and international aid for public diplomacy (see graphic below).<sup>4</sup> And this is a plausible claim. Indeed, when I was a diplomat myself in the 1980s and 90s, I can claim to have played all of these roles in the course of my day job.

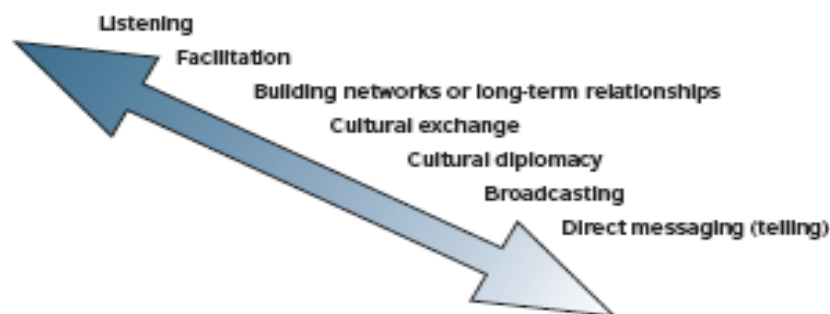


Fig 1: The range of functions embraced by the term 'public diplomacy' – taken from Counterpoint's report *Options for Influence*

The British Council's Chief Executive Martin Davidson makes more headway by using the example of climate change in a recent paper intended to clarify a distinct role for cultural relations:

*“The negotiation of a post-Kyoto agreement is clearly a responsibility of governments. Likewise, persuading populations of the need for specific provisions in any such treaty is a role for government-led public diplomacy. However, the building of networks to raise understanding of climate change, and to facilitate innovation that can produce mitigation and adaptation responses, is an area where cultural relations can contribute, through its emphasis on both exchange and collective action.”<sup>5</sup>*

This provides a clearer picture of an underlying model. The issue of climate change is complex, viewed from multiple perspectives, multiple cultures, multiple disciplines and multiple interests. There is therefore an initial task of building understanding and trust through dialogue. That leads to a common understanding, informs advocacy and in turn spurs action by those in positions of power.

Alex Evans and David Steven echo this analysis in their recent paper on ‘public diplomacy in a globalised world’.<sup>6</sup> They too take climate change as an example of the kinds of complex issues we face today. These they claim require first the fashioning of a common understanding, a ‘shared awareness’, that can in turn support a ‘shared platform’ for change and a ‘shared operating system’ that allows for effective coordinated response and action.

This reading of the world is summed up in the diagram below.

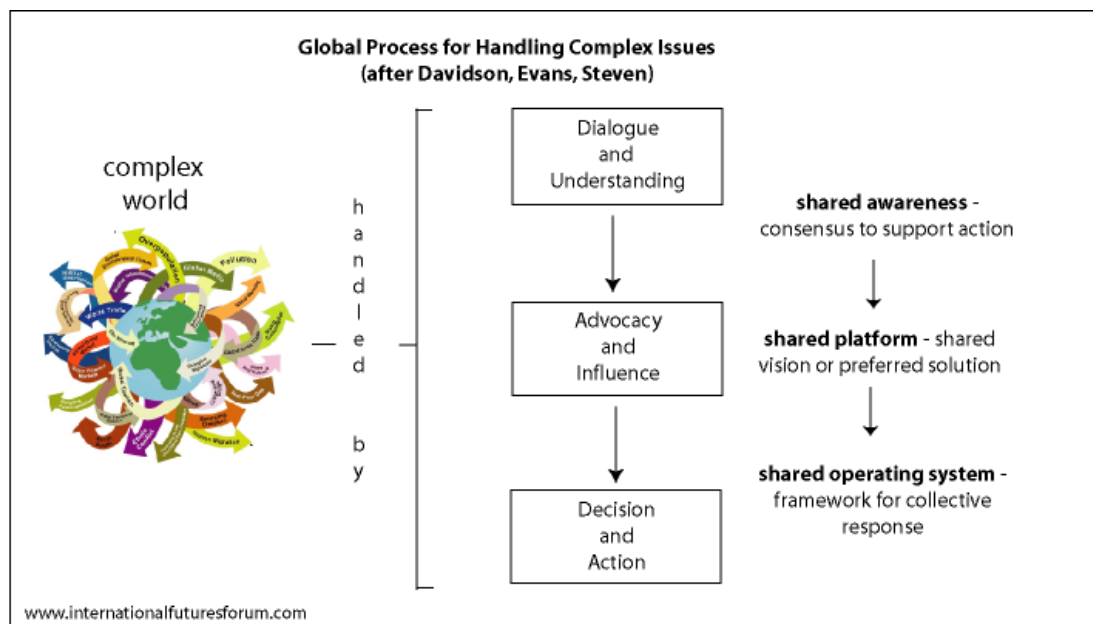


Fig 2: implied global process for handling complex issues (with thanks to my IFF colleague Bob Horn for the Medusa's head icon).

The role of cultural relations within this model is clear and well articulated: it is useful primarily in the dialogue and understanding mode, but also includes nurturing networks and coalitions for advocacy. This, I would suggest, is the model in use in the British Council today. But I believe it is too narrow and accepts too readily a set of implicit assumptions that need to be challenged.

## **Understanding**

There is an underlying assumption that the aim of dialogue and of building trust is to further 'mutual understanding'. The assumed goal is consensus. The notion of 'mutuality' suggests that we are equally willing to join a consensus around someone else's understanding as we are to persuade others to join our own. I am not sure that is always the case. But the critical thing is that any understanding is shared - a working consensus that can support action.

Counterpoint's pamphlet *Options for Influence* is explicit on this point. The dialogue process involves a coming together, a convergence of views. Whilst it acknowledges that there is another domain, in which wisdom unknown to either party is accessible, the pamphlet quotes an 'intercultural business trainer' as suggesting this domain 'is a mystery for everyone' and should therefore be avoided in the search for consensus.

My assertion is that we have to explore this space. If our standard models are failing both to make sense of the modern world and to furnish effective policy and action, then bringing those models together to generate consensus is a recipe for continued failure. We are effectively engaged in 'inter-faith dialogue' in which the search is for mutual understanding between fixed patterns of belief. What we need also is 'inter-pilgrim dialogue' involving genuine exploration. It is in this mode that we are able to access an emergent 'collective intelligence' beyond the capacity of any single participant.

To curate or facilitate a space that enables this kind of exploration requires a high level of inter-cultural competence. It is no part of 'public diplomacy' as currently understood. It is one of the core skills of the British Council and, in a fast-changing, interconnected, boundlessly complex world, beset by seemingly intractable problems it is an exceptionally valuable one. But it is not recognised within the confines of the current model that privileges mutual understanding over genuine engagement with 'the other'.

## **Influence**

Is there not a set of assumptions lurking also behind the notion of 'influence'? This is interpreted in terms of influencing powerful actors in the system - for the most part state governments, but also large corporations and other collective interests. Hence in the climate change example the emphasis is on influencing a process that culminates in a new inter-governmental treaty to succeed Kyoto. This will in turn condition the behaviour of other powerful state and business actors.

There are two critiques of this position. Both raise questions of governance.

The first critique is that international treaty-making is no longer an effective means of tackling complex global issues. It takes too long both to negotiate and to ratify, involves too many compromises, is more honoured in the breach than the observance, and in seeking a working consensus between many diverse positions will always be looking for solutions within a very narrow band of win-win provisions that can only ameliorate existing systems rather than introduce any really radical shift. How 'influential' is it, therefore, in today's world to seek to frame the terms of an international treaty?

The second critique goes deeper, questioning our capacity to intervene effectively in any complex system. The notion of treaty making sits inside an assumption of control: ie that we are still able to control and regulate a boundlessly complex world in ways in which intended will outweigh unintended consequences.

That view is challenged by increasingly influential findings from complexity science, network theory, evolutionary biology and other disciplines at the cutting edge of understanding order, evolution and emergence in complex interconnected systems. These are the ways of thinking that underpin our understanding, for example, of open source and web 2.0 cultures of 'social production' and 'order for free'.

But they also draw on deeper traditions of thinking about strategy and influence. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, for example, elevates the capacity to read the 'propensities' of an unfolding landscape as the highest competence. The task is not to 'intervene' in or 'change' the environment, but to position one's forces in that environment to best advantage. The ultimate aim of strategy is to perceive the future better than the opponent: to win the battle without fighting.

This reading of 'strategy' and 'action' in the face of a fast-moving, complex world owes a lot to a special kind of cultural competence - the capacity to read the landscape, including the human and cultural landscape, and indeed to design landscapes for creative and responsible human interaction (the ideal of open source). These competencies are immensely valuable - but will not be recognised or developed within a model dominated by traditional notions of 'influence'.

### **Action**

Finally, I suggest we also need to become more subtle in our distinctions about effective action. In particular, as evidence of both the unsustainability and the persistence of our existing actions mounts, we need to think about how to take new actions that feed a different, viable future.

This is not straightforward. Although we may be able to envision a viable future, and even point to examples of present practice that encourage us to think it is possible, the dominance of 'business as usual' mindsets, structures, readings of the world etc make it very difficult in practice to get beyond incremental innovation of existing systems. Such 'sustaining innovation', while laudable, may in the longer term serve only to postpone inevitable collapse.

By contrast, 'transformative innovation' is designed to ease the path towards a new viable system for the future. The overall process of running down the old and building up the strength and scale of the new is a process of cultural change over time. As California Senator John Vasconcellos puts it: 'we must be hospice workers to the dying culture and midwives for the new'.

This is a subtle cultural competence. The new system will start with small innovations that will be judged 'transgressive' and counter-cultural by the dominant culture. That is how cultures evolve and progress.

'Cultural relations' rightly understood can help open and hold open a space for both the new and the old cultures to co-exist long enough for the new to take root in the presence of the old. This is an essential competence - but again will not be developed in a model that views effective 'action' only in terms of fixing or prolonging the dominant culture.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that these thoughts do not come across as self-serving justification for the British Council's core competence. Cultural relations discussions can have the air of a solution in search of a problem. I would argue rather that the way in which we are framing today's global challenges has so far failed to grasp just how important an asset a competence in cultural relations might be.

But awareness is growing. General Stanley McChrystal's August 2009 assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, for example, is a masterpiece of cultural analysis and 21st century policy making:

*"It is that complex: where you build the well, what military operations to run, who you talk to. Everything that you do is part of a complex system with expected and unexpected, desired and undesired outcomes, and outcomes that you never find out about. In my experience, I have found that the best answers and approaches may be counterintuitive; i.e. the opposite of what it seems like you ought to do is what ought to be done.... Focussing on force or resource requirements misses the point entirely... the key take away is the urgent need for a change in the way that we think and operate."*

I agree. And an extended practice of 'cultural relations' is both part of the change we need, and a means of achieving that change more widely.

January 2010

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[www.internationalfuturesforum.com](http://www.internationalfuturesforum.com). This reflection is an invited contribution to the debate about British Council rediscovering its core purpose – cultural relations.

<sup>2</sup> 'Without man, no culture, certainly; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men'. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations?*, in "Foreign Affairs", vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Fisher and Aurélie Bröckerhoff, *Options for Influence: Global campaigns of persuasion in the new worlds of public diplomacy*, London: Counterpoint, British Council, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Cultural relations: building networks to face 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, Martin Davidson, FCO Publication, July 2008

<sup>6</sup> Towards a theory of influence for 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign policy: public diplomacy in a globalised world, Alex Evans and David Steven, FCO Publication, July 2008