

## **“Moments of Communication: Learning Science Diplomacy”**

A teaching-learning experiment at the Bergen Summer Research School 2019

By Scientific Coordinator of BSRS and Associate Professor Thera Mjaaland (art photographer, social anthropologist and filmmaker)

This paper will describe and reflect critically on the “science diplomacy” teaching-learning experiment that was carried out during the Bergen Summer Research School 2019 (17-27 June), when led by Professor Edvard Hviding from the Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen (UiB). As the scientific coordinator for that year’s summer school, I was involved in the facilitation of this teaching-learning experiment that Hviding had initiated, and which comprised four 1½-2-hour sessions over three days (24-26 June). My more specific contribution to the experiment was that I made a documentary about it, which meant that the students were not only given access to their filmed presentations but also got media training during the event. Below I will start by describing briefly what the Bergen Summer Research School is and how the “science diplomacy” teaching-learning experiment was thought and designed. Before I turn to the students’ reflections/evaluations of it, and the added value of using film, I will also reflect on the role of “practice” in teaching-learning processes. Finally, I will provide a critical evaluation of this “science diplomacy” training experiment.

### **Brief introduction to Bergen Summer Research School**

Under the leadership of University of Bergen (UiB), Bergen Summer Research School (BSRS) is based on a partnership with Norwegian School of Economics (NHH), Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), and Norwegian Research Centre AS (NORCE). The summer school takes place during two weeks in June every year, and welcomes up to 100 PhD candidates and junior researchers from all over the world to take part in up to six parallel courses that address the global challenges of our time. These courses (28 hours each) are tied together with common sessions on research tools, presentation skills, public keynotes by high-profile researchers, open plenary discussions, and (commonly) a one-day excursion into the Norwegian waterscape.

Since the first summer school in 2008 on Global Poverty, the four thematic pillars of the summer school, defined as (1) Energy, natural resources and environment, (2) Health, (3) Inequality and governance, and (4) Societal and global discourses, continue to be closely linked to poverty eradication and the United Nations 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDG).<sup>1</sup> On BSRS's website it is stated: "We believe that all disciplines have an obligation to challenge the international development agenda and to seek cross-disciplinary alternatives to the global challenges facing us."<sup>2</sup> Informing the rationale behind the summer school is an intent, not only to nurture relevant research on global challenges related to the SDGs, but also to enhance students' ability for critical and innovative thinking in the field by creating a unique environment for the participants from all over the world to engage, present and discuss their own and others' research.

### **The "science diplomacy" sessions: Recreating the UN General Assembly at Dragefjellet**

In 2019, 78 PhD candidates and junior researchers from 34 countries took part in the summer school's courses (Ocean, climate, society; Migration processes and practices; The unfinished agenda of maternal and child health; Water management; Cultural policy; and Agenda 2030). Additionally, BSRS 2019 gave particular attention to what was defined as the urgent need to explore connections between research and the diplomatic and political efforts required to fulfil the 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In the advertising for that year's summer school on the BSRS website, the enticing question, "How would you frame your research to make an impact on policies for a sustainable future?" was posed.<sup>3</sup> It was further promised that the summer school would address the role researchers can play in the interface between science and policymaking. The idea was to view students' presentations of their research as similar to a multilateral United Nations General Assembly meeting, where state parties and other representatives give policy advice on global issues to a panel.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uib.no/en/rs/bsrs/74475/global-challenges>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uib.no/en/rs/bsrs/122902/bsrs-2019-make-impact-policies-sustainable-future>

Together with the invited Minister Counsellor at the Norwegian Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, and Norway's chief negotiator for the SDGs, Marianne Loe, Professor Edvard Hviding introduced the "science diplomacy" teaching-learning experiment to all the students in a separate 1-hour session the first week of the summer school as follows:

The second week of the summer school is dedicated to a series of plenary auditorium sessions devoted to what is often referred to as "science diplomacy". There are also other concepts used for a process in which research-based knowledge is brought into direct dialogue with policy making, such as the "science-policy interface", or "science advice". But everything has to do with creating a moment of communication.<sup>4</sup>

In a filmed interview conducted before the "science diplomacy" sessions, Marianne Loe, emphasised likewise that:

Communication is key, of course. I know that if you are a scholar, you usually go deep into your field of research, and you want to have 300 pages and many hours to be able to communicate your results. But if you want people like me, in a process like that to be able to utilise your knowledge, you have to be able to focus on the important things, you have to understand a little bit about what our job is about, to be able to give us the knowledge that we need, because we do not have the time and the possibility to read 300 page-documents, but if you tell us... and, of course, you will have to communicate it in a way that we can understand.<sup>5</sup>

In the printed BSRS-program for 2019 (page 31), the task was presented as follows:

In these ("science diplomacy") sessions, every one of you will present a prepared statement of maximum 250 words. This should take no more than two minutes. Your statement must, in a concise and clear way, provide a brief proposal by you on how a certain aspect of your own research can contribute to the support and implementation of one or more Sustainable Development Goals, or just an aspect (e.g. one or more targets) of one specific SDG. The two-minute prepared statement will be presented to a chaired panel consisting of three to four diplomats and scholars, and the panel will provide a brief response to you. Each presentation-and-response will be given a total of five minutes, which includes walking to and from the podium. From these sessions you will gain a wealth of information from your fellow participants, and you will learn how to present key research messages to an audience of decision makers beyond academia.

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<sup>4</sup> Filmed session to present the teaching-learning experiment of science diplomacy (19 June, 2019). This quote is also used as the opening statement in the film made to document the experiment (Mjaaland 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Filmed interview 19 June 2019 at BSRS.

In the course of the summer school, there were common sessions with keynotes that addressed the issue of “science diplomacy” in the following order: On the opening ceremony, Marianne Loe held the keynote lecture, “The making of the Sustainable Development Goals: An insider’s perspective.” Assistant Professor Jennifer E. Telesca (expert in the panel the first day), held a keynote on “Does Diplomacy Have a Gender?” The Norwegian diplomat and current Director for the Section for the Horn of Africa and West Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, May-Elin Stener (diplomat in the panel all three days), talked about “The Impact of Diplomacy – and how to work with diplomats”, and the Policy Advisor for Research also at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Svein Bæra (diplomat in the panel the last two days) talked about “The Scientist Influencer: The missing link between research and policy decision making”. In order to nuance the picture a bit, and remind the students that there are many different actors (not only researchers) who want to influence policy, I had also invited Associate Professor in International Relations, Annika Bergman Rosamond from Lund University in Sweden, to give a lecture on “Celebrity Humanitarianism: A new mode of development practice?” Finally, the day before the “science diplomacy” sessions started, there was a 1-hour Q&A session with Professor Hviding who, as the initiator and planner of this teaching-learning experiment, was part of the expert/diplomat panel all three days, either as moderator or expert.

All the four “science diplomacy” sessions were filmed by Dragefjellet Centre of Learning and Communication and UiB Learning Lab (4-camera production with André Kvalvågnes, Knut Martin Tande and Anders Mildestveit). Outside the auditorium when having finished their presentation, all the students were interviewed on camera by me together with a photographer from the UiB Learning Lab (Frode Ims) about their experience of this training experiment. The diplomats in the panel were also interviewed before the sessions about their expectations, and afterwards about how they had perceived the presentations. By setting the stage for a new experiment in science-diplomacy interaction *in practice*, the summer school sought to enable participants to gain experience in communicating research to diplomats in ways that could make their own knowledge count.

## Learning through practice

With my initial training in art, before joining academia and becoming a social anthropologist midway in life, I am indeed sympathetic to using practice in teaching-learning processes. This is based on my own experience of working practically and valuing the realizations and insights that can come by way of, and through, practice. In fact, I was working as a lecturer in photography and later dean at the Department of Specialized Arts at the National Academy of Art and Design in Bergen (Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen) towards the end of the 1990s beginning of 2000, when the discussion on whether art practice could be put on equal footing with academic research heightened in Norway, and the 3-year stipend program for artists was established in parallel to an academic PhD.<sup>6</sup> Like art, anthropology is also a practice-based endeavour when engaged in participatory observations where the generated knowledge is a result of this immersed involvement over time. In fact, over the last 15 years or so, a field of art and anthropology has evolved, which investigates convergences between art and anthropology in both a methodological and epistemological sense (e.g. Schneider and Wright 2006, 2009, 2013; Ingold 2011; Mjaaland 2009, 2013; Laine 2018). My perspective on practice also finds resonance in the emancipatory teaching-learning tradition of Paulo Freire (1972) and his concept of “action-reflection”, where practice is at the centre of learning – also in a theoretical sense – as it allows for a thinking through practice. Theory and practice, rather than constituting a binary divide (in accordance with Descartes’ legacy), enters a dialectical relationship for knowledge to *emerge*. This dialectic perspective which also avoids the common dichotomised opposition between reason and imagination (cf. Mjaaland 2017), harbours critique of a positivist-informed science paradigm, since it is involvement and engagement that creates knowledge not separation and observations from a distance (see also Barad 2007). Drawing on John Dewey’s (1997 [1938]) focus on “experience” in learning, Tim Ingold (2018) emphasises “attention” as imperative in teaching-learning processes, and which becomes heightened by actually doing something in practice (as opposed to just listening and reading). So, how was this practical teaching-learning experiment, perceived by the students?

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<sup>6</sup> In Norway, UIB was the first university to get in place an art PhD in 2018: <https://khrono.no/uib-doktorgrad-kunst-phd/bergen-forste-universitet-med-doktorgrad-i-kunst/240600>. See also: <https://kmd.uib.no/en/news/nine-new-phd-fellows-at-kmd>

### Students reflections/evaluations of the “science diplomacy” experience

The questions the 76 students (out of 78)<sup>7</sup> were asked outside the auditorium on camera after they had finished their 2-minutes presentation and had received feedback from the experts/diplomats were as follows:

- *How was your experience of presenting?*
- *What do you think about having to cut down your complex research into a 2 minutes presentation?*
- *How will this training will be useful in your future career?*

Overall, the participants’ perceptions of these “science diplomacy” sessions were positive, even if most of them admitted that the 2-minutes format was challenging. Most perceived the training as useful for their future career; some even stated it was the most important experience from the summer school. After the first day of interviews I felt, however, increasingly uneasy about their answers being so unison and uncritical. The second day of interviews I, therefore, added sub-questions like:

- *Do you not lose anything when presenting in this 2-minutes format?*
- *Do you have any reservations to present in a format that is on the diplomats’ premises?*

Even after adding these sub-questions, there were only two of the students who provided something that could resemble a more critical reflection on the experience. The first example is from a male student:

- *So, you don’t have any objections to actually being pushed into this kind of regime to being able to present (your research to diplomats)?*

Part of me is actually against it, because, as I’m an architect by profession, so my entire persona and outlook is to be different. So, to conform like this is a bit difficult, but I understand where it’s coming from in the science background (field).

- *So, do you think you will use it in your future career? Or would you kind of go for other ways of presenting?*

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<sup>7</sup> One female student did not turn up for her scheduled “science diplomacy” presentation and the following filmed interview, while one female student presented but did not come for the interview.

I think when I'm based in a forum like this, I definitely will use it. But in terms of my other research, I don't think so. No (laughs).

The second critical reflection came from a female student, when asked the question:

*- So, do you have any reservations about having to cut down your research to reach out to the diplomats who have the power to decide?*

Yes, I think the whole experience shows me that unfortunately they really don't have very much time, and some of these issues can be extremely complex. So, it really becomes, you know, more than looking at the profoundness of each issue, it becomes more about catching interest, you know, which is a different skill set. It's also important, but in a way, I feel it's unfortunate that that is the skill set that matters most. But if it is this way, then it's a useful tool to learn how to deal with it.

*- Would you have preferred that it was another way?*

I mean, I think this is mainly an exercise so that we learn how to do it in the real world. In real life, I would hope that we could have more dialogue, more participatory spaces where, you know, not only us as researchers but the communities can also be heard, and not at a superficial level but really taking the time to think deeply about specific issues that matter on different scales. So, I think if one researcher has to represent a community in 2 minutes, it's very difficult to hear the voices of that community. Hopefully, there can be a combination of different kinds of spaces, spaces like this, it can be necessary on a global scale but then also maybe regional, national and local spaces for dialogue that are more, that goes to a deeper level.

In the evaluation questionnaire that was sent to all the students after the summer school, one of them also commented extensively on the lack of critical reflection surrounding the "science diplomacy" training:

The idea behind the science diplomacy sessions is interesting, and the exercise was quite unique. It was my first real-life contact with diplomats, and I think that especially in a research context, these cross-overs to other decision-making areas, are relevant. What strikes me, however, was the big discrepancy between week 1 and week 2 at the BSRS. While we were sensitised in week 1 about the dilemmas, challenges and frustrations connected to policy relevant research (e.g. surrounding migration research), it seemed almost as if critique was forgotten or even undesired in week 2. Instead, we were expected to comply to the structures set up for us (imitating a UN assembly, being filmed and judged based on a 2-minutes presentation). We were expected to connect our research to the SDGs, as if those were the only frame of reference relevant to any debate. While presenting the idea behind the 2-minute format, only once the organizers mentioned that we could also

critique the SDGs, but the majority of the information surrounding the exercise presupposed that a relevance for the SDGs is desirable for each of our research (projects). I find these presumptions problematic.

In this sense, the training became more of a “how-to-do-it-right” exercise than a practical experiment that encouraged “action-reflection”. On the level of critical thinking which is, as mentioned above, a stated goal of the summer school, much was left to be desired.

### **Added value of the filming and limitations in terms of feedback**

It was my idea to make a film about this “science diplomacy” teaching-learning experiment; as something that others could learn from. Before the students came to Bergen, they were contacted about the filming of the “science diplomacy” sessions, and asked if they could film themselves with their mobile phones in their home place and work environment while answering the following questions:

- *Who you are: Name, place, discipline and research interest(s)?*
- *What has motivated you to choose a career as researcher?*
- *What is your vision for yourself as a researcher?*

The plan was to choose potential protagonists for the documentary from these short film clips, and decide before they came to Bergen who were to be included. Representing all continents and all the courses, ten students (five female and five male) were selected and agreed to participate as the main protagonists (but only eight ended up in the finished documentary because of considerations concerning the length of the film). The plan had been to use the footage from their home countries in the documentary, but the film clips were too diverse and of too different quality to be used. They were asked to do it again when they went home after the summer school, but then (as could be expected) they were quickly shifting their attention and moving ahead to other activities. Alternatively, we could have followed some of the main protagonists outside the summer school venue when preparing their statements for the “science diplomacy” sessions, but the photographer from the Learning Lab had not been willing to do so, as he kept to a strict 8-16 working-hour regime.



The film, therefore, ended up being based on the conventional (and more boring) format of a “researcher grand prix” that has been organised and televised on several occasions in higher education settings. The final documentary (28:18 min) was made available on Vimeo<sup>8</sup> together with all the “science diplomacy” sessions<sup>9</sup>, so that the students could see their presentations and revisit the feedback they had got. I also sent e-mails (twice) to all the students asking about the added value of using film during these sessions and how they had experienced being interviewed on camera afterwards. The seven students who took time to answer my questions, asserted that the media training had made them more aware of what it takes to speak on camera, and again, as one of the female students said, “learn to keep it simple, short and impactful”. Another of the female students said about being filmed in the “science diplomacy” sessions: “I had the opportunity to analyse my presentation: main ideas, timing, English pronunciation, body language. We learn when we can revise our mistakes.” One male student elaborated a bit further on the question if being filmed added to his learning experience:

Oh yes, that really created a sort of feedback loop, which was also a new experience to me. The fact that I could see myself making speeches before the audience and interacting with the media all (the way) through, helped me reflect on what I thought, said and how it appeared. It helped me see, as if from a third-person perspective, if what I wanted to convey has come across unscathed through all these processes, and how I could work on it. The very fact that I could view all of these stages as separate processes, which I would not have been able to do if I did not watch my videos, was in itself a big plus.

Despite the low response rate, the comments I did get were well in line with the intended goal of using film, even if I cannot tell if all of the students took this opportunity to learn more from their filmed presentations.

### **Critical summing-up of the teaching-learning experiment**

Despite students overall positive response to the “science diplomacy” teaching-learning experiment when interviewed on camera and in their written questionnaire-based evaluation of the summer school, from the perspective of constructive alignment, I will, nevertheless, claim that activity, evaluation and learning outcome were not well (enough) aligned in this

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<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/386900681>

<sup>9</sup> <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6642403>

exercise. On the level of activity, which was to give science advice to diplomats/policymakers in terms of research-based *solutions* to particular global challenges linked to the SDGs, the students ended up presenting the background for, and the focus of, their research project (which is understandable for those who were in the early planning stages of their projects). So, despite the potential importance of these studies for the global challenges of our time, and despite exemplary keeping to the 2-minutes limit of their presentation, very few (if any) used the opportunity these “science diplomacy” sessions represented, to actually giving the experts/diplomats in the panel any clear science advice. While the students did, in fact, link their research up with specific SDGs, the science advice became, at the very most, implicit.

On the level of evaluation, the experts/diplomats did not give feedback on the actual activity/the presentations (except in a couple of cases where the student talked, what was considered, too fast). As the experts’/diplomats’ comments were primarily centred on the focus of the research and how it aligned with the SDGs, they missed the main point – to improve the students’ ability to give science advice to diplomats and policymakers. As one student remarked in the evaluation questionnaire: “I don’t think the comments from diplomats were very useful. They summed up what we had said and commented by saying: ‘It’s interesting’.” Other students pointed to these comments as superficial and all too vague. In fact, several of the students noted that comments on the actual presentation (beyond speaking too fast) would have been much appreciated. On camera, after the sessions, the two diplomats expressed that they were impressed about the clarity of the presentations and the complexity and substance of the projects (which, no doubt, would expand diplomats/policymakers general understanding of the diverging contexts that the SDGs intersect with), while the issue of science advice were left hanging. It seems, therefore, that they (and the students for that matter) had not been well (enough) instructed on the aim of the exercise.

On the level of learning outcome, the above-mentioned shortcomings do not mean that the “science diplomacy” sessions were not useful for the students as a memorable event where many had the feeling of mastery. Some even said they had felt empowered. The experience of comprising the research into a 2-minutes presentation is in itself a useful training to become

more concise and clearer in one's research communication, and presenting it before a panel of experts/diplomats in what was meant to resemble the UN General Assembly, likewise. Several of the students also said that by having to do so, their own research became clearer. However, how this "science diplomacy" exercise was communicated generated the impression that only the researcher manages to convey his/her research findings clearly enough, diplomats and policy-makers would both *listen* and *act* accordingly. This perception also surfaced when the ten protagonists for the documentary film were asked: "What would you do if the diplomats/policy-makers do not listen to your advice", and their immediate answer was that they needed to try harder. As one male student said:

Well, that would be disappointing, but I think I just take it in the stride and continue the engagement because I think as researchers we ought not to give up on what we really believe is for the good of our society, and I think we just need to keep knocking those doors and seeking a way to engage, and eventually be able to help the policy-makers and leaders in our society to appreciate the value of the work that we do. So, I think that it really helps when we are persistent and we keep on doing the work that we are doing.

The issue of power in global arenas, like the UN General Assembly, and the fact that other interests than knowledge may decide (e.g. values, political rivalry) was not part of the discussions that framed the "science diplomacy" teaching-learning experiment. The students were just presented with a format that they should learn to be able to communicate with diplomats; potentially giving them false hopes about what it is possible to accomplish in the future if pursuing this path. While it may not be convenient (or even possible) to include all angles all the time, the fact that the "science diplomacy" format was not more critically discussed was, in my opinion, and as noted by the student referred above, problematic.

On a final note, I guess some of these pedagogical issues could have been dealt with beforehand if the communication with the leader of the summer school and the secretariat, and especially with the scientific coordinator (myself) had been better. I was not included in the planning as a resource, and the facilitation of this experiment had, ironically, been informed by a lack of communication and constructive dialogue with the summer school leader.

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