Discreet, Not Covert:
Reflections on Teaching Intelligence Analysis in a Non-Government Setting

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the challenges in teaching intelligence gathering and analysis to non-government organisations (NGOs). It used Gibb's reflective model to assess the teaching impact because the model allowed the workshop convenors a structure to form their thoughts and observations. The teaching reflections in this paper are based on an intelligence gathering workshop conducted in Sri Lanka to NGOs working in the South Asian region. The paper reports on several pedagogical and cultural challenges that were encountered in delivering the workshop. In chief, the participants were culturally South East Asian, and before this workshop they had no exposure to intelligence gathering techniques. However, once presented, the members of the workshop could see reason for using intelligence gathering techniques for their own planning and security measures. A notable pedagogical issue was the workshop participants' reluctance to use or trust police/intelligence and military terms and concepts. Subsequently, the workshop facilitators, who were not South East Asian, attempted to adopt a different lexicon more suited to social science, rather than a military or intelligence vocabulary. Using a social science lexicon also allowed for scaffolding existing knowledge possessed by participants to an intelligence analysis framework. Underlining this workshop experience is an assessment of the efficacy of teaching intelligence gathering and analysis skills to NGOs.

Keywords: Non-government organisations, NGO, humanitarian missions, violence against aid workers, intelligence assessments, security intelligence, open source intelligence, tactical assessments

INTRODUCTION

According to a 2011 report by the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (UNOCHA), violence against aid workers in settings such as "Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan have increased globally" since 2005–2006 (2011: 11). Attacks on aid workers have been perpetrated with greater sophistication and organisation due to the tactics and weaponry used (UNOCHA,

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2011: 11). In addition, NGOs (non-government organisations) that are the target of this violence are often perceived as no longer conducting themselves in the spirit of neutrality (Burkle, 2005).

While this issue is complex, NGOs that provide aid are sometimes perceived as serving the interests of governments (or conversely, criminal or insurgent groups). For instance, Boyce (2002) pointed out that NGOs can experience the pressure placed on them through the competing foreign policy objectives of donor nations, as well as the polices of host nations. In some countries, aid agencies are expected to supply the host nation's intelligence services with information to continue their operations (Laipson, 2008). Donor governments, those funding aid delivery, have been known to revoke funding if aid agencies are deemed to have been in communication with insurgents or the "enemy" (Laipson: 2008).

Paradoxically, aid agencies are dependent on host country government police/intelligence and military for security information to assist them deliver aid and keep their workers safe. But this is not always the case—take for instance, the July 2003 bombing of the UN in Baghdad. This event was a turning point for NGOs to do things differently; such as engaging private security firms to provide security intelligence to plan operations, as well as providing physical security for aid workers. According to Burkle (2005: 26), "Before deployment to conflict areas, especially those characterised by insurgent activity, humanitarian providers must realistically assess the threats to life and to the mission. They must obtain pre-deployment situational awareness education, security training and optimal protective equipment and vehicles."

CONTEXT

In response to the challenges faced by NGOs' reliance on security intelligence advice from host country agencies, there have been calls to empower aid agencies with the training to gather and analyse their own intelligence (Zwitter, 2016). MacLeod (2009), in his article *Leveraging Academia to Improve NGO Driven Intelligence*, makes a case for NGOs to develop their own intelligence capabilities using university academics as a remote intelligence analysis service. According to MacLeod (2009), such an arrangement would provide NGOs with more independence, and it is MacLeod's work that set-in motion the convening of the security intelligence workshop. This workshop was held in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in September 2016. The workshop was designed as a case study to assess how intelligence analysis could be taught to NGOs.

Rather than relying on private security company's or government agencies, the workshop convenors posited that encouraging non-government organisations to gather and analyse intelligence provides them with their own independent security advice. This proposition was supported by Zwitter (2016: 1) who pointed out "…humanitarian missions require good intelligence and solid risk assessment." Therefore, a good intelligence report should be free from the constraints of being associated with host governments, local criminal gangs or insurgents, and foreign peacekeeping forces. Having the capacity to conduct their own intelligence assessments would help re-establish their own neutrality, and hence offer a safety buffer from being targeted by one side or the other. Further, it gives NGOs more control over decision making with respect to the kind of aid they will deliver, and under what conditions they decide to do it (Bollettino, 2008).

To provide NGOs with an opportunity to gain the skills necessary to generate their own intelligence, an NGO intelligence gathering workshop was conducted using a practice-based professional learning approach (Whitford and Prunckun, 2016). The workshop's aim was to impart a new skill—writing a *tactical assessment*—in order to give NGOs the confidence to recover their sense of independence by being able to develop their own intelligence capacity (ICfSD: 2016).

A tactical assessment is a type of intelligence report that takes a wide view of an issue under investigation (Prunckun, 2015: 221). It is not reactive, but anticipatory. That is to say, tactical assessments ask, and answer, questions that require some level of probability to be assigned to an event's likelihood. For instance, an NGO that is planning to deploy to (the fictional country of) Orrenabad might ask these questions:

1) determine what socio-political issues are prominent in Orrenabad; and,

2) suggest how these issues might manifest in to security issues that this NGO needs to consider if it was to go ahead with its aid program.

So, a tactical assessment is well suited for adaptation by NGOs regarding security issues for their in-country personnel and/or aid operations.

METHOD

The workshop convenors used Gibbs's (1988) reflective practice-based learning approach to identified pedagogical issues to scaffold the workshop's content. This was deemed necessary because intelligence research and its associated lexicon have had negative connotations when discussed with social scientists (Prunckun, 1996). In the main, this is because the social science practitioners have had no experience of intelligence gathering, and coupled with the negative perception of intelligence work portrayed in the press and cinema, it is likely they believed it was based on secrecy and deception (Miller, 1994: 254). As such, they consider the work of security intelligence agencies as alien. By way of example, in October 2001, then-Secretary of State, Colin Powell (2001) stated, "And I want you to know that I have made it clear to my staff here and to all of our ambassadors around the world that I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such *a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team*." The emphasis that has been added underscores the image NGOs would like to distance themselves from.

The workshop convenors chose a participant observer approach for the evaluation. To do this, they selected the International Consortium for Social Development's conference held in Sri Lanka (ICfSD: 2016). This was done for two reasons. First, those attending the conference were social workers who had a special emphasis on aid delivery (ICfSD: 2016). They were university educated in the social sciences, and therefore, understood research practices regarding the provision of social welfare.

Secondly, Sri Lanka was also a conducive venue to conduct the workshop. Having gone through an almost 26-year civil war (1983–2009), the nation is the base for several NGO operations. The country has NGOs that have a lived-experience in working in conflict zones. Specifically, many of the local workshop participants told the convenors that they could recount the errors made by their aid agencies because of a lack of security information. Subsequently, the workshop was geographically well placed, as well as being able to offer intelligence training to those that were on the front-line of service provision.

Therefore, the conference provided the workshop convenors with an opportunity to discuss the use of security intelligence in an environment where the participants felt comfortable and in a mindset conducive to presenting ideas. Further, because NGOs are often under resourced when it comes to providing

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training, the workshop was provided free of charge; it was a set workshop item on the conference agenda so NGO delegates had the opportunity to participate.

To evaluate this trial, Gibbs's reflection model (1988) was used to examine the interactions observed during the workshop. This method also allowed the convenors to make sense of the encounters from a teaching perspective. The Gibbs (1988) reflection model provided a useful structure to evaluate the results. The convenors followed each of the six steps during and after each session as well as the workshop series, so that the findings could be used to guide future workshops (see figure 1).
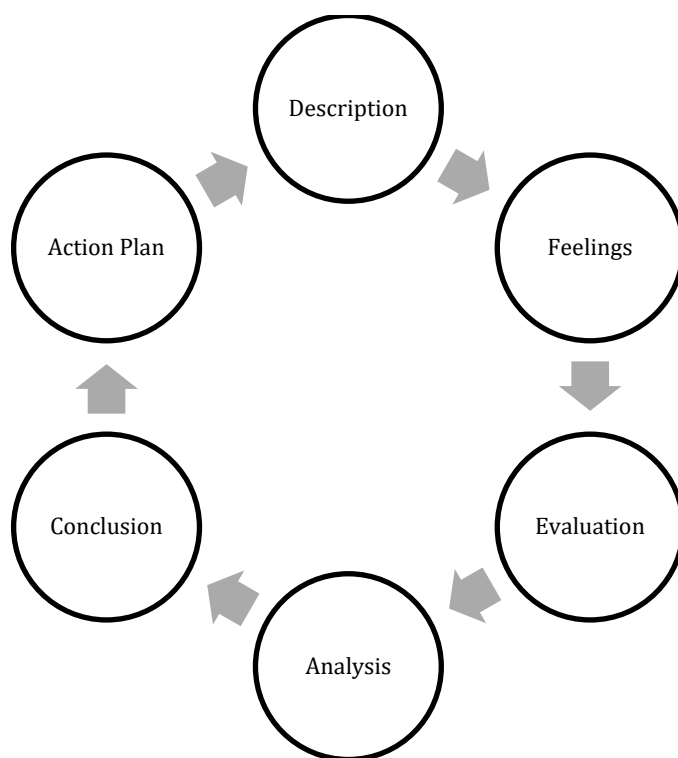

Figure 1—Gibbs (1988) Reflective Cycle

Because the participants did not have English as their first language, it was difficult to request formal written feedback. That is why the convenors adopted the use of reflection–on–action (i.e. after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) as Finlay (2008: 3) advocated.

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These two processes were informed by Dewey's concept for reflective practice (Finlay, 2008: 3). That is, Dewey's view was that "…while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habit of reflecting (Dewey, 1933: 35)." Dewey perceived reflection as an "…active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads… it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality (Dewey, 1933: 9)."

So, through post-workshop discussions with participants, and the reflective teaching process undertaken independently by the convenors, several insights were gained that are discussed below using Gibbs's (1988) model as a framework: 1) description; 2) feelings; 3) evaluation; 4) analysis; and, 5) conclusions. The analytical process involved asking questions such as: How was the presentation received? What aspect(s) were good? Why? What aspects were troublesome? Why? What are the options for the next presentations?

RESULTS

Description—What Happened?

The NGO intelligence workshop was held in Kandy, Sri Lanka on 29 and 30 September 2016. There were fifteen participants. The majority were of South Eastern Asian background. The participants were also working in the region. All had a university education, the majority with a background in social welfare. The workshop was conducted in English and the participants indicated that they had a limited understanding of intelligence gathering and analysis.

The convenors were not from South East Asia. They had wide-ranging teaching experiences, including teaching in developing countries, as well as a strong understanding of security intelligence work.

The workshop was conducted over two sessions, on two separate days. Each session went for approximately two hours. The first session was conducted as a description account that outlined the need for NGOs to develop intelligence capacities.

- What is socio-political information?

- Why gather socio-political information?

- What can be achieved by gathering socio-political information?

- What is the scale of socio-political information required?

The session also covered the rudimentary aspects of intelligence gathering and analysis, but placed these concepts in the context of applied social research so that the participants could see the nexus between what was being advocated and their own academic background.

The second session built upon the first by providing participants with the practical understanding of what a tactical assessment is, and how it is crafted. It stepped the group through identifying sources of information that could help answer their query, and discussed the utility of using open-source information. Using a notional case-study, this session also included a discussion on how a tactical assessment can be used within the participant's organisations and how NGOs could use McLeod's (2009) theory of leveraging university academics to provide a remote intelligence analysis service.

Feelings—What were the Convenors Thinking?

Given the reaction of NGOs to comments like that of former-Secretary of State Powell (2001), the workshop convenors were concerned about how the transfer of intelligence theory and methods would be accepted by social science practitioners. While there are many commonalities between the academic disciplines (in fact, many intelligence analysts have come from careers in social sciences—Prunckun, 1996; Ward, 2012), the world views expressed within each practise are markedly different—the roles of intelligence officers and NGO workers are manifestly unalike. For instance, the convenors observed that many of the participants could see the benefits of NGOs developing an in-house intelligence capability, but participants thought it would be too removed from their social sciences training.

A difference in world view was also observed in the participants' different use of language in describing methods and techniques. The convenors came to the view that choosing the right terminology would be vital in engaging the workshop participants. Like Secretary Powell (2001) using the term *combat team*, the feeling was that using intelligence terms would disconnect the participants from the learning experience.

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The feeling was that it would be a challenge to demonstrate that NGOs could benefit from having their own intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities. There was also a feeling that a degree of trust would be needed to conduct the workshop to encourage participants to reflect on their field experiences and how these experiences could be improved by adopting an in-house intelligence capability.

Evaluation—Pros-and-Cons of the Experience

The first session provided background and context for the writing of a tactical assessment, which was held the next day. This session was presented in what is best described as an exposition teaching style by both convenors. Although the presentation, which was supplemented by visual teaching aids, went well, it left the workshop convenors uncertain if the participants had engaged in the learning. For instance, there were only a few questions asked by participants and many of the questions the convenors put to the participants went unanswered. Using the reflection-in-action method, it was considered that the teaching approach of the first session did not achieve the degree of trust needed to develop a meaningful engagement for the second session. Although nothing was said explicitly by the participants, it was their *silence* that was the trigger.

So, in the second session, the convenors leveraged the research of Marx, Fuhrer, and Hartig (1999) by deliberately incorporated a semi-circle seating arrangement; rearranging the seating into a more intimate setting which was hoped would result in a more cooperative learning atmosphere, or inclusive "classroom." It was observed that this change allowed participants to engage more. For example, as an introduction, the convenors invited the participants to share their thoughts about their experiences in using government and military security intelligence. The convenors observed that the discussion was less restricted and freer than the day before, with all participants engaging in the exercise.

Group discussion (Vygotsky, 1978) was used to scaffold the participants' experience by illustrating why they may find a benefit in developing their own tactical assessments. While the participants were open about their experiences with various host governments, they were reluctant to think in terms of developing intelligence capabilities. The workshop participants appeared uncomfortable with the idea that they should operate using secrecy. Again, using reflection-in-action,

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the convenors decided to not use words like *secrecy* or *covert*—opting for terms like *discreet inquiries*.

Analysis—What Sense Did the Convenors Make?

From a pedagogical point of view, the workshop contained the essential elements for a positive learning experience. It followed the "...the instructional techniques and strategies that allow learning to take place. It [considered] the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment" (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002: 10). But despite these preparations—such as hand-outs, slide presentations, microphones for the speakers, comfortable chairs for the participants—the subject matter appeared to have been the difficulty. Teaching a topic that is useful, but seen by the learners as, in some form, objectionable, failed to yield better results. A compelling explanation for this lack of engagement can be seen in Fast, et al.'s (2013) observation that, "…the failure of [NGOs] to systematise and clearly articulate acceptance [of intelligence assessments] as a distinct security management approach and a lack of organisational policies and procedures concerning acceptance hinder its efficacy as a security management approach."

Conclusion—Could Anything Else have been Done?

Even though the initial teaching session was devoted to laying the foundational basis for the follow-up practical workshop, the participants seem to maintain a cautious intellectual distance from the topic; refraining from engaging in the practice-based learnings. The lack of engagement likely stems from long held apprehensions about the activities of various intelligence agencies that have been highlighted by world's media in recent decades. Various intelligence agencies have used, or attempted to use, the cover of NGOs (Walsh, 2006). They have also used NGOs as sources for information (Laipson, 2008). Subsequently, NGOs have lost their trust in intelligence agencies, or their methods (Cole, 2015). Additionally, as DeMars (2000: 196-197 described, "NGOs as serving universal human interests." The emphasis on *principles* challenges notions of secrecy and covert methods, even those surrounding the basic intelligence gathering techniques. Adopting the methods of an intelligence officer are likely to have been perceived by these participants as being *unprincipled*.

Action Plan—What Does this Mean for Future Workshops?

The convenors considered their findings and decided that in the future, efforts to promote the development of a security intelligence capability to NGOs needs to be based on trust. Educators could not simply rely on the participants to recognise the intrinsic benefits in the proposition. As such, the challenge is to divorce the analytic techniques from the intelligence sector (e.g. espionage). And, in doing so, consideration needs to be given to how intelligence terminology can be modified so that social welfare workers are more likely to feel comfortable in the learning process.

Future workshops should be based on a greater awareness of the differences in operating principles, and consequentially, the professional outlook held by the intelligence sector and that espoused by NGO workers. This may need to be done by convenors building relationships with NGOs before the workshops are conducted.

During the workshop, it became apparent that there was also division between the participants regarding the relationship NGOs should have with the host government. It ranged from an acceptance that NGOs deliver programs and services that governments mandate, to the need to negotiate with governments and then work distinctly separate from them, with minimal contact. The convenors observed that those that advocated a distinct separateness from government were more comfortable with developing intelligence capabilities.

The final observation the convenors noted regarded the learner group. That is, to obtain the best learning experience, NGOs that have a compatible philosophical outlook about operating independently, could benefit the most from taking part in a workshop. As a result of the reflective process, the convenors posited that NGOs that expressed a degree of scepticism/cynicism with government are more inclined to assume a greater individual responsibility toward developing their own security intelligence capabilities.

IMPLICATIONS

It is safe to say that there is a need for security advice for any organisation that plans to deploy to an area that is experiencing civil turmoil. NGOs fall into this category. At present, they rely on the services of police and intelligence agencies to provide this advice. Having such a close tie to government agencies can place them in a position that outsiders view as being closely aligned, even though this is

unlikely to be the case (Schneiker, 2013). The implications for this type of relationship are many, but sufficient to say, that chief among them is the loss of independence NGOs are respected for—aid for the good of the communities they serve.

Miller (1994), in his paper *Educational Programs for Intelligence Professions*, described the reluctance of the business community to adopt intelligence skills as mostly a misunderstanding of the nature of intelligence gathering and analysis. It also provided an explanation on why NGOs are relucent. Miller writes that for many *intelligence* is confused with *espionage* where intelligence means gathering information in an illegal or unethical manner (Miller, 1994: 254). The challenge for those teaching intelligence skills to non-intelligence personnel is to demystify the covert myth.

The goal of the workshop was to spotlight this issue and point to an alternative approach for conducting the security intelligence assessments themselves. This could be done using the format of a tactical assessment, and using, not classified information, but data that is in the public domain—open-source information. Open-source information does not carry the same restrictions as working with classified data. An NGO in-house assessment would never reveal to an "outsider" a covert source or project the impression of complicity with government agencies, or equally, insurgents/criminals. Moreover, because NGOs have limited resources, the use of a tactical assessment in conjunction with open-source information makes for a cost-effective option. If conducted well, a tactical assessment will be on par with a government produced report. If, as McLeod (2009) has advocated, it was done in collaboration with a university study centre or the like (as opposed to a private security company), it should be indistinguishable in quality to an intelligence agency's briefing.

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