

Intercultural Education for Peacebuilders

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The field of peacebuilding has developed in response to the widespread number of violent conflicts engulfing the world in the two decades since the end of the Cold War. As the field has grown, its pioneers have endeavored to create educational programs that build the capacity for engagement in conflict prevention, resolution and healing in war-torn societies. MA and PhD programs have multiplied, as have shorter programs designed to train citizen activists and community leaders, especially those working in war-threatened or postwar environments.



Paula Green Photo
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Schoonhoven

International Training

In 1997, I founded the Conflict Transformation across Cultures (CONTACT) program at the School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont to train new generations of leaders as peacebuilders. Participants in this summer initiative tend to be adult professionals employed by NGOs who work in environments of violent conflict and are motivated by the urgency for peace. Most have previous exposure to training programs within their country or region, but no prior opportunity to form social networks across the globe, which are critical for those involved in Track Two (citizen) diplomacy as they provide exposure to new strategies as well as encouragement for peacemaking efforts.

Social Peacebuilding and Historical Narratives

The social dimensions of peacebuilding overlap with anthropological concerns, such as the transmission of hostility and the healing of communal relations sundered by war. In working with students, I observe how feelings of hatred and revenge plague individuals living in war-torn communities. As enmity is passed through communal narratives and locked

into historical memory over countless generations, communities become trapped in cycles of violence. It is through these narratives that tensions are kept high and efforts toward social healing are often sabotaged.

Leaders damaged by war are able to take advantage of these recycled narratives, making opportunistic decisions through the lens of their own and the community's unhealed wounds, humiliations, self-interests and perceptions. Historical memory, with all its biases, demands retribution and resists reconciliation. Chosen traumas are stored up in the collective psyche, destructively reappearing in new generations.

COMMENTARY

In *Blood Lines*, Vamik Volkan writes about the role of historical narrative, chosen traumas and chosen glories. Historical narrative includes those elements of the past that a community chooses to remember about itself, usually favorable, and excludes what it prefers to discard, such as its own excesses and destructive behaviors. Shared perceptions and collective memories of grievances exaggerated and augmented by time, feed ethnic animosity, protect group cohesion and form the rationale for future conflict. Historical narratives can be mutually recognized and adjusted to accommodate varied perceptions and more complex realities.

heroic and powerful moments. Cherished glories and traumas can be honored skillfully or serve as the impetus or rationale for future violence. Milosevic's appearance in Kosovo to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Serb defeat at the hands of Kosovars became the rallying cry for the late-20th-century Serb violence in Kosovo.

Self-awareness and personal transformation can serve as antidotes to the sorrowful knots of selective memory and vengeance. If those who lead organizations and communities are themselves somewhat conscious of historical dynamics, partially free from or at least aware of prejudices and more aware of others' needs, wounds and perceptions, then their own empathic attitudes and behaviors can shape their communities toward more just and peaceful interactions. A belief in the liberating power of diversity-based experiential education underlies international peacebuilding education, and offers hope that these programs can impact new generations of peace leaders.

Increasing Intercultural Competence

Peacebuilding institutes cross academic disciplines and offer curricula that include conflict analysis and intervention; social change theory and practice; skills in negotiation, dialogue and nonviolent action; linkages to development and resource issues; and reconciliation and forgiveness processes. Threaded throughout these topics at CONTACT is a meta-

cer, to find common ground across differences and to build successful alliances across previously unbridged ethnic divides.

To create a more secure and peaceful world, peacebuilders need cultural exposure and fluidity, including the capacity to identify areas of common ground and to be comfortable in a wide variety of cultures. Exposure to the "identified Other" in a contained educational environment encourages positive attitudinal and behavioral formation toward groups who have been dehumanized and relegated to enemy status. In our own era, in which religious ideologies particularly have become markers of separation, learning in a religiously diverse community offers important opportunities to expand tolerance toward people from particular faiths.

Intercultural peacebuilding education also involves learning about traditional approaches to prevent, recover from or negotiate terms of armed conflict. Western methods are often structured quite differently from customary processes of mediation between disputants, in which use of respected elders in decision making may be pivotal. Rehabilitation of child soldiers and war-affected victims may be the most vital, immediate focus of reconciliation processes. Exposure to the varying models of redress and healing promotes utilization of conflict resolution methods that are best suited to the context, makes it possible for global South participants to protect their own

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Chosen traumas such as civil war, genocide or invasion, are unique markers in a group's history that shape collective responses to new events. Hyper-vigilant security precautions in the US after Sept 11 are one example. Chosen glories, however, celebrate particular events such as nation formation or victory and remind groups of their

level agenda of consciousness change and community building. The program creates opportunities to personally question the consequences of biased socialization and its reinforcement by media and educational institutions. Exploring the many identities in each individual's life allows women peacebuilders, for example, or those sharing a passion for soc-

heritages, and increases the sensitivity and humility of peacebuilders from the global North. ■

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