

PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES - TEACHING PEACE

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Jake Lynch provides a well - researched outline of the essential knowledge that teachers would need to introduce the concepts of peace and conflict to their students...

We have the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy to thank (or perhaps blame) for fixing Peace in popular imagination as one-half of an antonymic dyad with War. As for establishing war and conflict as widely used synonyms. The gift, or fault, of journalism. To use a different word at 'second mention' is a virtue of news writing.

Teaching peace opens these definitions and elisions to critical thinking by identifying and questioning their component parts. In doing so, it resources groups to relate the dynamics of conflict, violence and indeed peace to layers of their own experience, both direct and mediated. So, it honours and – to an extent depending on circumstance – emulates the ideal of its soulmate, critical pedagogy, in enabling all to be both teachers and learners.

From my background as a television reporter and presenter (and sometime Sydney Correspondent for the UK Independent newspaper) I began by interrogating the typically event-driven coverage offered to news audiences. How often does a violent incident make a headline as the latest episode in “the war between X and Y”? A later paragraph will often open thus: “The conflict began when...” and go on to remind readers of an earlier violent event.

Downplayed, or often omitted altogether, are the processes that lead up to the events. This is where the definition of conflict coined by the Norwegian polymath, Johan Galtung – seen as the ‘Father of Peace Studies’ – is key. Conflict, he declared, is nothing more than “a relationship between two or more parties who have, or think they have, incompatible goals” (Galtung, 1976: 290). That relationship can be reproduced in social relations at many levels – up to and including the waging of war. But it doesn’t need to be. The use of military force is a response to conflict, but only one of a range of possible responses.

Galtung envisaged those relations in a triangle, dividing them into Attitudes, Behaviours and Contradictions: the

ABC of Conflict. Impetus for change can emanate from any one of them at any time. And they can combine to produce real-world effects. Violent behaviours can harden attitudes and make it more difficult to open dialogue about goals and their potential for areas of compatibility. “We don’t talk to terrorists”, in the familiar phrase.

Indeed, investigations found that outrage occasioned by Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure was one factor in deterring the Ukrainian government from engaging seriously with the Turkish peace plan, which could have halted the war there as long ago as 2022.

Then, is conflict – as distinct from war – necessarily a bad thing? Change is inherently conflictual, since pretty much any change will suit some people more than others. Students can be invited to imagine a society where nothing ever changes. The sclerosis would freeze injustices in place. To intensify conflict can have the effect of ‘calling out’ such problems, exposing them and bolstering demands for reform and progress.

If war and conflict are – as per countless news reports – synonymous, then peace would risk being seen as the antonym of conflict, not just war. And that would make it impossible to attain, since conflict, on this definition, is an inescapable and in many ways essential fact of life.

How about violence? Again, the field generally follows Galtung’s conceptual innovation by dividing violence into component parts: the form it takes from the effect it brings about. The latter is the defining feature: violence is anything that holds people’s “somatic and mental realizations below their potential” (Galtung, 1969: 168).

It’s obvious how this results from, say, a hospital or apartment block being bombed. That is Direct Violence: so-called because of the direct subject-action-object sequence of They did This to Them. But the effect can be wrought in many other ways too: woven into systems and structures, perpetuated by rules, ideas and assumptions.

These can be divided into two other forms: Structural Violence and Cultural Violence. The latter makes the other two “feel right – or at least not wrong”. So, could peace be defined as the absence of violence?

The absence or cessation of Direct Violence can be seen as “negative peace” – not to indicate anything wrong with it, indeed many groups of people in today’s world understandably yearn for it. Negative in the sense that it can be ‘got’ by refraining from doing something.

Positive peace, on the other hand, entails tackling the other forms of violence as well. Re-imagining and reforming structures and institutions; exposing prejudices, re-thinking notions and images of self and other that have hardened over time and across generations. It’s implicated in the United Nations mandate of Peacebuilding, added in the 1990s to its traditional jobs of Peacemaking (brokering agreements) and Peacekeeping (deploying neutral forces in blue helmets). Creating new, more equitable ways of doing and being together as a social safeguard against lapsing or relapsing into war.

A peaceful society is one with abundant resources and willingness to seek out instances of structural and cultural violence; promote and conduct inclusive dialogue about how to change and overcome them and commit to the widest and greatest possible fulfilment of human potential.

As such processes can (indeed must) occur at all levels, we all have a part to play. So, interrogating and broadening definitions of these crucial underlying concepts of war, peace, conflict and violence – as I have briefly done here – allows groups of learners to engage by reference to their own experience, impressions and position in society (both local and global).

PEACE JOURNALISM

One abundant source of material for class discussion, as already hinted above, is news stories about various conflicts.

What makes news the way it is? Influences on content have been arranged, in relevant research, in a “hierarchy” – with a role for journalists themselves and their ethical and operational precepts, but embedded in (and often outranked by) commercial and organisational considerations.

The classic news story has a beginning, middle and end that all take place, or become apparent, in the interval between deadlines. That’s what makes it news – as opposed to ‘olds’. Reporters must establish not only why we should hear about something, but why we should hear about it today. What’s happened since the last time we heard about it?

These pressures produce a dominant form that Galtung diagnosed as “war journalism” – not, or not only in the obvious sense of reporting about wars, but a way of representing conflicts (of all kinds) that cognitively primes us for violence. It’s what we are led or left to expect and regard as the inevitable – even desirable – corollary of the story as presented.

Hence the remedial form of Peace Journalism, which has breathed life over the past few decades in both scholarly research and various forms of practice, such as training courses for journalists in societies affected by violent conflict by way of media development aid.

Whereas War Journalism is oriented towards war-and-violence; propaganda; elites, and victory, Peace Journalism adopts the opposite orientations, towards conflict-and-peace; truth; people, and solutions. It has been defined as journalism that “prompts and equips readers and audiences to consider and value nonviolent responses to conflicts” (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 5).

A typical War Journalism story will open with a traumatic event and go on to juxtapose reactions to it through quotes from elite sources, often confined to those on ‘our’ side. These may concentrate on promising further steps to ensure the ‘enemy’ is neutralised or even ‘destroyed’. Then ‘peace’ can be ‘restored’.

Peace Journalism, on the other hand, will often find sources from sub-elite levels whose own life experiences reveal the underlying processes, replete with structural and cultural violence, that lead up to such events. Their inputs may be used to inspect the claims of leaders in a fresh light and critically assess them. And it will pick up on initiatives and suggestions for positive peace by addressing these more structural and systemic problems, to prevent the recurrence of direct violence.

It can be a powerful teaching and learning technique to source such material as a group and compile an alternative version of a news story. News in its typical rhetoric

does not invite discussion about itself. It is still more likely to self-certify as “the way it is” rather than prompting us to wonder how it came to be that way. To realise there is a fund of options for telling it differently can be most eye-opening. Today, of course, there are abundant alternative media operating in liminal spaces that offer such material, so it can be found with relative ease.

So these are some beginnings for any teachers wishing to offer peace as an object and subject of learning. It can be empowering for groups; but also challenging, as assumptions (that ‘we’ are the ‘goodies’, for example) are critically examined and discussed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Associate Professor Jake Lynch teaches into the Master of Social Justice degree program at the University of Sydney. He has spent the past 30 years researching, developing, teaching and training in Peace Journalism. For this work, he was recognised with the award of the 2017 Luxembourg Peace Prize, by the Schengen Peace Foundation.

Scholarly publications include several books and over 60 book chapters and refereed articles. Jake served for nine years on the Executive Committee of the Sydney Peace Foundation, and for two years as Secretary General of the International Peace Research Association.

Before taking up an academic post, Jake enjoyed a 20-year career in journalism. He was a Political Correspondent for Sky News, at Westminster, and the Sydney Correspondent for the Independent newspaper, culminating in a role as an on-air presenter (anchor) for BBC World Television News.

Jake’s novel series, the Janna Rose mysteries (published

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