

Can Teaching Peace Education Prevent Peace?

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In 1927 quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg states he had a shocking but clear realization about the limits of physical knowledge: *The act of observing alters the reality being observed. He called this the “observer effect”.*

Can we look at how we approach “solving the problem” of conflict conventionally so we can see if this is possibly the very thing that prevents it?

Can we look at the multilevel academic approach to peace education that is supposed to lead us through this problem-solving process to the resolution of conflict?

Can we look at what prevents peace through the eyes of academia, through its myriad academic interpretations – through anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and so on and on, to find at some point “The Answer” to the “Problem” of conflict?

The various academic departments in universities involved in teaching peace education are trained to look through their limited specialized academic areas of expertise and only seeing that restricted viewpoint they fragment peace education into differing scholastic subdivisions. This intellectually divisive approach to peace education just postpones the firsthand observation needed to see and hence understand the fact of conflict at the primary prevention level as it exists in each of us every moment. Academia then requires students to digest this scholarly fragmentation, each professor touting his or her own specialty as if it were the only one needed, or they combine their pedagogical

efforts in a hodge podge fashion and though this pooled effort confuse students even further.

Here are some examples of these basic tenets of conventional peace education college programs:

1. **The Founding Premise of Peace and Conflict Studies: War and other forms of violence, despite their omnipresence, can be mitigated and transformed through the application of knowledge.**
2. **The Nature of Violence and Its Causes: As these are complex and multifaceted, students are expected to approach their studies from a number of interdisciplinary perspectives.**
3. **The Causes of War and the Causes of Peace: An exploration of the entire conflict process associated with war from a variety of theoretical and methodological angles, including rationalist and behavioral models that examine the concept of war and why wars begin.**

Can we question this deeply held belief that “the application of knowledge” or “studies from a number of interdisciplinary perspectives” or “a variety of theoretical and methodological angles, including rationalist and behavioral models” can bring an end to human conflict? We are proposing that they cannot because their basic premise is incorrect. The “knowledge” or prejudice I have about you and that you have about me – and the divisive image this creates of “the other” – creates human conflict. This “knowledge” includes the images and attitudes that we have been indoctrinated into. As it is genetically based, it resides in the memory of all human beings.

How thus can “knowledge” put an end to the knowledge that is creating conflict? Do we need more evidence to counter the information that is dividing us and creating conflict?

Using another academic perspective to see if peace can be brought about by knowledge, let’s look again at this deeply held belief that knowledge is the solution to the problem of conflict.

Examples of Frequently Asked Questions in University Peace Education Courses

The questions below are commonly asked in university peace education programs on “Social Justice.”

1. **What is social justice? What are human rights? What is peace? What are the origins of these concepts and how have they been interpreted across time and place?**
2. **What causes social injustice, violations of human rights, conflicts, and wars? What are the consequences of these for individuals and communities?**
3. **How can social injustice, violations of human rights and conflicts be prevented? What are the conditions that create justice, peace, and respect for human rights?**
4. **What are the origins, strategies and aims of social movements seeking justice, peace, and respect for human rights?**
5. **What are the philosophical, cultural, religious, and political underpinnings of traditions of nonviolence and ethical behavior?**

As prospective students look at this typical page from a university’s peace or social justice program, they soon discover that they’ll be required to answer the above questions. The university’s required 36 units explores answers from a broad sampling of courses of various intellectual disciplines including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, political science, history, psychology, economics, and many more.

We can recognize an admirable search for effective peace and justice, but with such enormous questions, each having endless potential answers, how is it possible to succeed in selecting and mutually agreeing from such a myriad of choices?

What would it take to investigate these questions in the totality of what they mean? If it were even possible, how long would it take to find the answers to these incredibly complex questions? Wouldn’t it take immense research in only one of these areas, such as “What are the religious underpinnings of traditions of nonviolence and ethical behavior?” to find the answers to these questions? There are thousands of religious traditions of nonviolence, every one of them saying that its belief system is dedicated to peace. How about cultural,

philosophical, or political traditions of nonviolence and ethical behavior? Many, many thousands of such traditions go back perhaps to the beginning of recorded history.

In the first group of questions above, asking for concept definitions and their origins, how can we discover and agree upon effective answers to all these highly complex questions? Many lifetimes of extensive research by hundreds of “experts” in these fields could provide some “theories” for possible solutions to these questions – which is what we have done – but to no avail. Finding useful answers is literally impossible. In the meantime, wars continue to rage as we continue to try – and continue to fail – to come up with effective answers to any one of these questions. In checking the reference pages of each book on the theories of peace education, we can find literally hundreds of other titles. Each of those references in authors’ books most often contains hundreds more references. Exponentially, that can quickly climb to millions, considering that some of the references go back many years, some even centuries.

Thus, we are caught in an endless labyrinth of thought, never finding any conclusive answers that address these questions in a way that bring about peace. All these questions seem to do is postpone any immediate action to end conflict, when, in fact, conflict can be ended only in the moment. The moment is all there is.

This leads us to realize that we have for millennia been looking in the wrong direction – to thought to resolve the conflict that unknowingly thought has itself created. In other words, thought is not aware of what it is doing. It still thinks that the “problem” – and its “solution” – is “out there.”

In examining the view that thought is the answer to the problem of conflict, we now have a case for demonstrating that thought used in this way will only lead to more thought, that will lead to more thought, that will lead to more thought – ad infinitum – incessantly and in a frenzied and disordered, fragmentary manner. Whenever we approach peace in this way, our search grows more and more frenetic and anxious until it simply grows out of control.

Blindly we go on thinking that maybe we just haven’t dug deep enough. So, we keep researching endless theories of endless authorities, hoping that one day we will have enough “evidence” to “prove” our theories. But which evidence,

which proof and for which theories? That's what got us into conflict in the first place – my theory versus your theory, my belief versus your belief – each trying to dominate the others to be recognized as “The Answer.”

We must see the ludicrous illogicality of this. As we observe, we begin to see how the pursuit of peace is preventing the very peace we so strongly desire. Those trying valiantly to understand find themselves caught in definitions, explanations, hypotheses, and beliefs (which, ironically, means “to act without sufficient evidence.”) As they attempt to navigate this maze of speculations to try to prove their theories, they must conclude it still hasn't worked. In a form of madness, incessantly trying the same or slightly different “cures,” they continuously repeat the same results – because they have never really addressed what prevents peace at the primary level.

If knowledge applied at the primary prevention level ironically prevents peace, how can we clearly state what place knowledge has – and what place it doesn't – in peace education? What ability do we naturally have that can prevent conflict from happening that is not knowledge?