

# Teaching Peace and Conflict in Higher Education - the need for a changing dynamic in a changing world

Elizabeth Mc Donnell August 2012

The field of peace and conflict studies (PCS) first emerged in response to the destruction wrought by the Second World War and continues to evolve and grow in response to the challenges to peace arising from an ever-increasing world population, poverty and inequality, climate change and global movements of peoples. The 2005 riots in Paris and those in London in 2011 indicate that there is a need to build capacities in all societies for addressing conflict creatively and for collaborative problem-solving, if such conflicts are not to take a negative destructive path and end in violence and long-term damage. The growing recognition of the need and role of peacebuilding is creating new opportunities for qualified professionals and thus increasing the demand for education and training in the field.

However, herein lies somewhat of a paradox. There is no clearly defined discipline of peace and conflict studies nor of the field of peacebuilding - there are many divergent interpretations of they are and the context of operation and application is in constant flux. In academia, there is no agreement on a core curriculum or on core competencies for graduate education in peace and conflict studies, resulting in a lack of coherence across academic provision. The field is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on many areas of the social sciences including political science, history, psychology, international relations and sociology. This brings benefits but also generates difficulties in creating educational programmes that are adaptable and flexible to changing student demands and needs. The place and role of Higher Education (HE) is coming under challenge and scrutiny. Increasing competition, decline in public funding, change in student populations and attitudes, and rapid technological advances are drivers for change that will continue to grow. The potential of open educational resources (OERs)<sup>1</sup> has yet to be realized

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<sup>1</sup> Open Educational Resources (OER): OER are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain and have been released under an open license that permits access, use, repurposing, reuse and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. The use of open technical standards improves access and reuse potential. The term "OER" is not synonymous with online learning, eLearning or mobile learning. (Olcott Jr. 2012).

but their impacts on educational provision could be transformative. Phelen (2012) queries the role of teaching and academic institutions in a world that makes it possible for the creative learner to seek out and put together a learning package for themselves outside of any formal HE institutional setting, especially if novel approaches to validation and accreditation become accepted and recognized. In the field of practice, the boundaries between security, peacemaking, humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding are becoming increasingly blurred and there is no consensus on what constitutes a 'peace professional'. Yet the concepts of a duty of care and 'do no harm' are central to addressing the needs, and working with the vulnerabilities, of those who are experiencing, or have experienced, the devastating impacts of violence and war. Education and training has a critical role to play in ensuring the preparedness of professionals to work in this complex field and to provide them with grounding in the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Given such issues, a study was undertaken on behalf of the UK Higher Education Academy on the teaching of peace and conflict in UK Higher Education institutions. The study showed that peace and conflict study programmes are spread across a range of disciplines and departments in UK universities and that the approach taken in course content and teaching is primarily of an 'academic' nature i.e. placing emphasis on learning of theory and its application, developing skills in critical inquiry, analysis and evaluation and building research capability. Such findings were echoing in a workshop held on the topic of *Connecting the study of peace and conflict with professional practice* at the Open University in London. The workshop brought together 25 participants from academic institutions and practitioner organizations, all of whom engaged enthusiastically with the topics of discussion and considered the opportunity to meet in such a way to be very timely and beneficial to all involved.

From the workshop, the existence of a divide between academic and practitioners is acknowledged. For some, the divide shows itself as a seeming arrogance by students and academic researchers and a lack of appreciation of the problems faced by communities in situations of violence or post-violence. Academic researchers show little empathy with their "subjects" and little realization to what extent conflict can take a toll on a population, and how being looked at as a 'dataset' can be. This can lead to highly questionable ethical practices and

NGOs (non-governmental organizations) at grassroots level get stuck with the consequences. On the other hand, practitioners may show a lack of appreciation and knowledge of what it is academics do and assume that they lack capacity to do anything useful on the ground. However, these are generalised views and do not reflect those of all practitioners or all academics, especially as some continually criss-cross academic-practitioner boundaries.

The study and discussions show an immense goodwill and interest between practitioners and academics to collaborate, to learn from each other and contribute to developing learning and teaching in peace and conflict. They acknowledge that the 'divide' between them creates wariness, suspicion and lack of recognition of the inherent value in each and the potential greater value in unity. Practitioners have many questions regarding peacebuilding and methodologies that academics could help to answer and, in turn, have access to data of use to academic researchers. Combining the two ways of seeing gives the best of both worlds- scholars could add a practical dimension to their work and practitioners a scholarly aspect. Opportunities for training and gaining practical experience could be negotiated as well as bringing an awareness of the assumptions and bias that external interveners bring coming into a situation from their own cultural context. The benefits could be extended to the communities with whom practitioners work. Translating academic language and concepts into simpler words (which does not mean simplifying the idea) and using accessible language enables local people and practitioners to own the processes of peacebuilding rather than seeing them as something complicated being done by outsiders. In turn, conveying their own work in terms that the academic community can more easily understand supports the appropriate framing of both research and application in practice.

### **References and further reading**

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