

**Volume 5 Number 3 (2011): 353-361**  
<http://www.infactispax.org/journal/>

## **A Cultural Approach to Peace Education**

Carl Templin  
The University of Toledo  
[Carl.Templin@bex.net](mailto:Carl.Templin@bex.net)

and

Jing Sun  
The University of Toledo  
[Euphrosyne.Sun@gmail.com](mailto:Euphrosyne.Sun@gmail.com)

### **Introduction**

As we endeavor to develop as completely and comprehensively as possible the relatively new field of peace education it is important that we, as teachers, prepare ourselves to facilitate learning within and related to a diverse multiplicity of people. Central to our ability to be effective facilitators is a capacity to make intellectually attainable ideas that originate in cultural context with which students are unfamiliar. Equally important is the attainment of a proper command of strategies that may be used to relate this and other information to the culture or cultures of which students are a part. Offering the opportunity for students to gain a broader cultural awareness and validating the cultural background from which students come has been one of the many foci of our work and our research at the Community center where we conducted the activities to be described. The result of this work and research can go a long way towards an answer to the question – why is culture an important facet of peace and peace education, and what role does it play? An answer to this question will provide future peace educators with a

well-developed theoretical basis for their lessons, practical methods for teaching peace in a way that students can understand, and a deeper appreciation for the approaches that many different cultures take to solve problems in just and equitable ways.

The field of peace education has only just begun to have a well-developed presence in the 20th and 21st centuries. As a direct result of the horrors of World War II including Nazi concentration camps, the abuse of prisoners of war in Japanese territory, and the invention of the atomic bomb, the United Nations felt it necessary to attempt to ensure peace by officially declaring the absolute rights of every human being on earth. “One of the first major achievements of the newly formed United Nations was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948”<sup>1</sup>. This event led to the development of peace education as both a field of study and as an important facet of school curriculum. Over the years peace education has been modified and expanded to respond to concerns such as the Cold War, gang violence, and terrorism but even so it is safe to say that peace receives far less attention than other subjects within education. Whether on an international or domestic scale, it is important to continue to create new responses to the ever evolving nature of conflict.

We (the authors) have been engaged in the project of teaching students from a low-income predominantly African-American neighborhood the importance and benefits of peaceful action. In doing so we have used a vast number of different methods to allow students to connect with new and culturally different concepts and even invented a few of our own. Our goal in this course of action is and has been to offer students a chance both to broaden their understanding of the world in which they live and which we must share, and to use these new understandings to solve the problems with which they are confronted in their own culture and society. Bateson once said, “Children develop through concentric worlds, gradually able to move further from home but always seeing each larger sphere through the lens of the previous stage”<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the new ideas children encounter will always be seen from the perspective of the culture from which they came. Therefore, it is of vital importance that students both have access to information from multiple cultural traditions and know that their own culture or cultures are valued in an interactive space. In this essay we will explain the theoretical background that has guided us throughout our work on this project and share the methods and results of our original research with the scholarly community. We do these things in the hope that the ideas presented here may be specified or generalized to respond to unique situations at all levels of cultural interaction as they occur.

## Literature Review

### *Right Relationship with Other Cultures*

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. *ABC: Teaching Human Rights: Practical activities for primary and secondary schools*. (New York: Author, 2003). 3.

<sup>2</sup> Bateson, C. M.. *Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way*. (New York, NY: Harper, 1994). 170.

One of the important documents is the Earth Charter, which was created by the independent Earth Charter Commission and was convened as a follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit in order to produce a global consensus statement of values and principles for a sustainable future. The mission of the Earth Charter Initiative is to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace. It respects a diversity of opinions in that it is generated from cross-cultural deliberations and agreed upon by citizens from around the globe. It has been formally endorsed by thousands of organizations, including UNESCO and the IUCN (World Conservation Union). The educational purposes underlie itself as a cosmopolitan ethical framework for the pedagogy of peace. The purposes include the following: “awareness of basic values, cultivation of the moral attitudes of respect and care, understanding and application of the moral principles, and the development of the moral capacities necessary for right relationship with self, other persons, other cultures, other life and the earth”<sup>3</sup>. The attitudes of respect and care applied to the relationship with other cultures are shaped by the recognition of human dignity inherent in collectivities of people. Thus, the basic moral attitude on this level is respect and care for peoples. Furthermore, as it is required in the Charter, “Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision”<sup>4</sup>. To realize these aspirations, we future educators be universally responsible for the communities in which we live.

Given this framework, our research pays close attention to the values that each culture brings to the table and attempts to identify effective ways to teach aspects of each cultural code to members of other cultures. Inseparable from this process is identification of the ways in which the customs and conventions of one culture are best learned by members of other cultures. Orienting our research toward these goals has provided us with much insight into the views of the cultures from which our students come as well as a frame of reference from which to more closely examine our own cultures. Thus, the methodology of our research incorporates cultural ideas that are unfamiliar to our students while at the same time utilizing different strategies for making the information interesting and relevant to our students.

### *Possible Solutions of Cultural Conflicts*

Nowadays, with globalization and immigration becoming growing trends, children are living and growing up in more diverse communities. It is our responsibility to teach them how to manage conflict nonviolently and to understand and value the pluralistic society they are living in. One of the most feasible solutions of cultural conflicts is to promote a sense of cultural diversity and tolerance, leading to a win-win situation in which the solution will meet the

---

<sup>3</sup> Snauwert, D. T. “The cosmopolitan ethics of the Earth Charter: A framework for a pedagogy of peace.” *In FactisPax*, 2 (1), (2008): 97

<sup>4</sup> The Earth Charter. (2000) <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>.

interests of everyone. “It’s not necessarily our first choice, but it’s one we can all live with. It makes us feel like all parties are winners”<sup>5</sup>.

To achieve the goal of win-win situation, students need to know how to negotiate with each other. One of the effective methods to solve conflicts is to teach them the core skills. Those skills include defining the conflict and then identifying approaches, such as, avoiding, diffusing, and confronting violently or nonviolently to solve conflicts. As communication is an essential part of conflict resolution, active listening requires that people have their hearts fully present and engage themselves in others’ feelings. After that, people can express their feelings through peaceful means such as I-messages or the “I Care Rules”. Students should be encouraged to explain their positions clearly so as to gain a better understanding of the problem and then work to solve a problem in a peaceful manner and in a way that is acceptable for everyone involved. Likewise, conflict resolutions also relate to the concept of going to a safe place, such as in meditation or a stepping back and counting to ten before we respond to negativity.

Encouraging the adoption of such techniques provide students with a practical understanding of the material as opposed to it being mere factual knowledge. Facilitating peaceful action requires, in addition to a sophisticated theoretical basis, a set of practical strategies for handling real-world situations. The ways in which these strategies are learned are bound up with cultural norms regarding what information is considered relevant and thus the way in which a simple artifice such as an I-message is taught ought to be in adjustment to the perceptions of the culture that the student is representing. Doing so allows the student to grasp just how the strategies can be employed within a cultural context of their own lives.

### *Make a Peaceful Classroom*

In order to have students learn to be more receptive to the cultural diversity and more tolerant to interact with each other, a peaceful classroom must be encourage by creating a democratic environment where students can cooperate, develop moral sensitivity, think critically and feel empowered. Harris<sup>6</sup> suggests five important facets of a peaceful classroom. First, the classroom must be a democratic community where students can feel dependable, safe, and agreeable to the group. Second, cooperation should be taught and promoted in the classroom so that students are more willingly to work and communicate in cooperative groups and establish strong, close relationships with each other. The third component is developing moral sensitivity, that is, students are explored to the real-life situations of diversity and allowed to experience the issues and to solve the problems. Another consideration is to emphasize and foster critical thinking in a peaceful classroom. Finally, self-esteem should be developed through the teachers deliberate efforts to encourage and affirm their students. Therefore, in such a peaceful

---

<sup>5</sup> Lantieri, L. & Patti, J. *Waging Peace in Our Schools*. (Boston: Beacon Press,1996). 65.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, I. M. The peaceful classroom. In *Peace Education*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company,1988). 121-138.

classroom, "...students rely on each other. They learn together, and the success of learning activities depends upon the cooperative contributions of all"<sup>7</sup>.

## **Analysis of Cultural Differences and Conflicts**

### *"Dragons as the Symbol of Power" – A Comparative Approach*

Culture refers to a set of shared values, norms, and beliefs held by the members of a group, such as a nation or organization<sup>8</sup>. Recognizing and understanding differences in cultural patterns provides individuals with a framework for interpreting the goals and behaviors of others<sup>9</sup>. This is especially relevant when individuals are in conflict and must work towards common goals<sup>10</sup>. Culture is likely to establish strong expectations about the type of relationship that will be created, the goals that the parties are working towards and how the conflict will be resolved. Then such expectations are violated, individuals risk escalating the conflict. Thus, the challenges of globalization and the complexity of cultural differences mean that international negotiation skills will be of increasing relevance and importance for international management and cross-cultural interactions in general<sup>11</sup>. The United Nations even recognizes the promotion of peaceful cross-cultural interaction in education as a human right. The "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" states, "Education shall be directed to full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace"<sup>12</sup>. As evidenced previously, increasing such cultural awareness and interaction is also one of the basic

---

<sup>7</sup> Harris, I. M. The peaceful classroom. In *Peace Education*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988). 126: 121-138.

<sup>8</sup> Hofstede, G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. (London: McGraw Hill, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Hofstede, G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. (London: McGraw Hill, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Jonsson, C. *Communication in international bargaining*. (London: Pinter, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Kremenyuk, V. A. *The Emerging System of International Negotiation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights.  
<http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/universal.asp>.

principles of “The Earth Charter”<sup>13</sup> and is therefore of crucial importance to both our project as a whole and the lesson to be explained here.

The cultural differences we encountered manifested themselves in some of our tutoring activities. When I (Sun) was about to lead the lesson entitled “Dragons as the Symbol of Power”, I deliberately enlightened the students that the dragon is the symbol of power in both Western and Chinese cultures, but they are portrayed and treated in different ways due to their choice of using their power, thus, leading to good or bad relationships with people. By contrasting different cultures, I was intended to give the students a wider perspective to understand the following themes: identifying and keeping your inner power, using power for kindness, respecting the power of others, respecting other cultures, and establishing right relationships with others. Meanwhile, I attempted to guide the students to establish right relationships with others and promote a sense of tolerance of other cultures.

I began the lesson with asking the kids about their impressions of dragon. The two male students present that day responded, “They are big, terrible, and powerful”<sup>14</sup>. I compared the symbolic significances of dragons in both Western and Chinese cultures. Western dragons are portrayed as evil because they would eat people or destroy villages; so there is much folklore about the fighting between heroes and dragons. By contrast, I explained to them that dragons play an important role in China and are traditionally considered to be the governors of rainfalls in Chinese culture. They have the power to decide where and when to have rainfalls. They are lucky creatures that can bring happiness and power, and are even worshiped as gods. The Chinese often consider themselves to be the descendants of the dragon. By saying these things, I attempted to make it known to the students that both Western and Chinese dragons are symbols of power but they are portrayed in different ways due to their choice of using their power. The Western dragons abuse their power to hurt people so that people are afraid of them and hate them; while the Chinese dragons use their power to benefit people by controlling the rainfalls. In doing so the dragon causes people to respect and worship them as gods. With my interpretation, the kids responded in a different way when I asked them about dragons again. L stated “The Chinese dragon is good and the western dragon is bad because the western dragon hurts people but the Chinese dragon helps people.” Based on the difference in responses, I am convinced that it is helpful and necessary to provide students culturally diverse perspectives during their perception of knowledge. Through the activity of contrasting the same object from the perspectives of different cultures, the students will not only take cognizance of cultural differences but also gain a chance to have a different set of experiences and a potentially new and wider perspective for perceiving knowledge that can expand their capacities of conflict resolution in a peaceful manner during their studies and lives.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Earth Charter.(2000) <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>.

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from fieldnotes are meant to represent the general kinds of situations encountered and observations made on a regular basis. They are not intended to single-out or comment on the behavior of specific individuals. Hence, no names or information that could be used to identify individuals will appear in this article.

*“Peace Dollars” – A Relational Approach*

A major challenge that has faced us since the beginning of our project was finding ways of exposing the students who come to this program to culturally different ideas while at the same time making the new knowledge relevant and potentially useful within the cultural context of the lives of the students. One mechanism that we have utilized for making such new ideas engaging and understandable for students is to take an artifact that is significant to the culture from which the students come and use it in a different way in order to demonstrate a culturally different idea. Theoretically this relational strategy is to have a three-pronged effect. First, because the artifact is something that the culture of the students holds to be important and is something of which the students would almost certainly have an understanding, the students will be more likely to find the lesson culturally validating and consequently will take an interest in it. Second, the use of an already culturally significant artifact in a different way allows the student to conceptualize the incorporation of other cultural ideas into their own culture as a possibility. Third, the fact that this learning experience takes the form of a concrete activity allows students to actually practice this incorporative process. In short, this strategy encourages students to take an interest, see the utility of, and actively practice positive culture interaction. By maintaining a solid grounding in peaceful cultural interaction and demonstrating the possibility and practical use of ideological cultural interconnectedness this strategy also shows great consistence with the tenets of The Earth Charter. “... we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked”<sup>15</sup>. It is this rationale that constitutes the basis for the following activity conducted at The Center as part of our research.

Over the course of our research it became apparent that the importance of money and the significance of economics in general was, as a matter of culture, very different. This culture difference initially manifested itself in a moment of subtle conflict. During a previous lesson (“Dragons as the Symbol of Power”) two of our students, rather than focusing their attention on the content of the lesson, began, at one point, to focus on a laptop computer on which we were displaying the material for the lesson of the day. The facilitator (Sun) records in her fieldnotes from that day, “L listened to me attentively and nodded her head; the boys attempted to touch my laptop, but Carl helped to stop them”. This incident illustrated for us a difference in the way our respective cultures viewed the objects of economics and thus the conflict (i.e. the lack of attention on the lesson and the undue attention given to the laptop itself) was actually a conflict of cultural ideas about what the laptop represents. To us educators, coming from White culture and Chinese culture respectively, the laptop represented a common tool with the purpose of storing and displaying information. To the students, coming from the culture of an impoverished mostly African-American neighborhood, we theorized that the laptop represented an economically valuable object with the purpose of empowering and conferring status upon the owner. This was the topic of a short discussion that took place between us educators after this lesson. Second author goes on to write in her notes,

---

<sup>15</sup> The Earth Charter. (2000) <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>.

Carl noticed that the kids paid much attention on [sic] my laptop and they might easily get appeal to valuable things. That may be because their family culture that values things concerning money, which may lead them to work for them. We should help them to realize that money is not that powerful and each of them has their inner power that can help them fulfill their dreams and make an impact on others.

It was this insight that inspired the use of a new relational strategy for teaching about peace. A history of slavery, disenfranchisement, and a struggle for civil rights as well as the fact that money is scarce in this particular neighborhood all serve to inform the cultural attitude towards economics that we witnessed during our research. Therefore, in order to more effectively engage the students it became apparent that what was required was a lesson that would speak to their culture directly.

Exactly two weeks after the occurrence of the incident described above, we returned to The Center and I (Templin) was to facilitate in the teaching of a lesson of my own designed entitled “Peace Dollars”. Using the insights gained from the lesson of the previously described session, I designed this lesson specifically to relate to the culture form which our students come while at the same time presenting them with a culturally different idea about the purpose of money, and by extension economy, as being an instrument for conveying a message of peace to the people of this country and possibly to the people of other countries. The lesson involves examining the symbols that appear on both American coins as well as coins from other countries from various points in history. For, example, the olive branch, a commonly used symbol for peace, appears on many coins and other monetary units in this country. The fact that money is constantly changing hands means that such symbols are seen by many different people and are meant to remind them of the peaceful values of their country. By using money as the medium by which to transmit the point about peace, we were able to create an environment that was much more conducive to learning not only a lesson about peace but also a new and culturally different conception of the purpose of money. Sun records in her fieldnotes from this day, “K and M responded actively and K offered her answer that famous people could appear on coins and those figures made people to [sic] remember them...”. Here we can see the positive results of this educational strategy. Whereas in the previous session different cultural ideas of economic objects led to conflict and disengagement from the lesson, in this session students became actively engaged – feeling as though they could express their ideas and apparently taking something away from the experience.

On a broader level, the effective execution of this relational strategy confirms the validity of Harris’s<sup>16</sup> suggestion that peace is best learned by experiencing it as a worldly reality and not first and foremost by authoritarian instruction. “An irony of peace education is that an educator need not necessarily teach the topics of peace education in order to conduct a peaceable

---

<sup>16</sup> Harris, I. M. The peaceful classroom. In *Peace Education*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988). 121-138.



classroom”<sup>17</sup>. In our case, the “Peace Dollars” activity served the purpose of creating a peaceful classroom twice over. In the short term the students were more responsive to a lesson that took their own cultural background into consideration while simultaneously allowing them access to the knowledge of another culture. While the long-term effect is beyond our capability to experience directly, our hope and intent was that the students would leave with a new understanding of and appreciation for their own ability to learn from other cultures that can have a positive impact on the culture of which they are a part. Through the attainment of a newfound efficacy students will be able to take what they learn from this experience and use it to effect positive change in the classrooms at the school or schools to which they return.

## Conclusion

The research we have carried out implies that culture differences can be either a barrier or an advantage to learning peaceful principles and actions depending on how they are approached by educators. Explicit comparison of cultural conceptions allows students to see that the same ideas, objects, and entities have different applications and meanings depending on context – cultural or otherwise. Diversity in perspective allows students to recognize that they have a choice in how to act and react in certain situations as well as providing them with a sense of the options open to them. Just as important, there must be a feasible plan in place for educators to relate the information being taught to students in a manner that they find culturally affirming and relevant. Therefore, it is our finding that both approaches – i.e. comparative and relational – have advantages that prove very effective at cross-cultural communication under the right circumstances. In any case, the cultural identity of students cannot simply be ignored; rather it must be addressed in an appropriate way. Generally speaking, the strategies outlined in this essay and develop throughout our research indicates what these appropriate ways of addressing culture might be. Comparison promotes an explicit understanding that there are differences between cultures by offering concrete examples of such differences in pointing out how the same objects or situations can mean different things to different people. Relation allows educators to actively engage students in the incorporative process by examining a familiar object or situation from the point of view of another culture. Each of the strategies takes cultural difference into consideration and each is designed to encourage a dialogical encounter rather than a conflict between cultures. Furthermore, the use of such strategies demands that the educator be aware of his or her own cultural identity and recognize that his or her own viewpoint is not necessarily the only one. That is, the educator has to have formed the project of imagining other viewpoints as being able to be other than they seem to himself or herself before he or she is able to teach others the same skill. Failure to do so risks devaluing students as fellow human beings and encourages dismissal of the information offered as irrelevant and devoid of practicality. As peace educators it is our duty to do everything within our power to keep such a state of affairs from becoming reality.

---

<sup>17</sup> Harris, I. M. The peaceful classroom. In *Peace Education*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988). 122: 121-138.