

**Reflections on International Institute on Peace Education 2013:
Exploring a Possible World Free from Violence**

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“Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

—Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970/2000, p. 72)

“Our work is inspired by a vision of a transformed global society, a human future for all the Earth’s people and a healthy future for our shared planet.”

—Betty Reardon (*Learning Peace*, 1994, p. 40)

Transformative researchers and practitioners from all over the globe use conceptions of critical thinking that are—at heart—the same. Further, they see such thinking as a tool to change the world for the better. Brazilian education reformer Paulo Freire (1970/2000) sees critical reflection and committed social action in a deeply intertwined cycle arising from questioning and rethinking knowledge. American Nel Noddings’s (2007) definition encompasses reasoned analysis of issues, as well as reflection on moral and social beliefs and action. Tanzanian-born Ladislaus Semali (2004) offers perspectives from elders in his native Chaggaland, who describe critical thinking as *imanya*, (“to know intellectually and to be morally or spiritually motivated”) and *kusare* (“to consider all the possibilities ... think deeply”). He concludes, “Critical thinking is a lived activity, not an abstract academic pastime” (pp. 170-171).

Joe Kincheloe (2004) adds that critical thinkers recognize that they are part of a social fabric woven by threads of racial, economic, class, gender, religious, and geographical circumstances

and awareness, and that they understand that these connections affect the ways they think, learn, and change.

International Institute on Peace Education: *Weaving the Fabric of Peace*

In July 2013, at Puerto Rico University in San Juan, transformative global citizens from over twenty countries brought critical thinking to life. A seventy-person learning community gathered to participate in the weeklong International Institute on Peace Education. IIPE is described as an “annual, intensive, international learning experience in peace education.” Peace educators, activists, and researchers from all over the world have assembled for thirty years to teach and learn with each other in this unique institute, creating “an intensive short-term learning community that embodies the practices and principles of critical, participatory peace pedagogy.”

Founded in 1982 by Betty Reardon and colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University, IIPE’s original focus was on nuclear disarmament and peace education methodologies. There were few such initiatives in educational institutions at the time. Over the past thirty years, IIPE has become more holistic, evolving into what Reardon describes in conversation as a peace education “swap shop.” Reardon, Alicia Cabezudo, (2002) and a group of global educators use the term “comprehensive peace education” (p. 19) to describe the broad outcomes envisioned and multiple strands of education employed in the effort to teach and learn for peace. It is a participatory process.

In contrast to such participatory learning, Freire (1970/2000) denounces “banking education,” in which “the teachers make communiqués and make deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 72). As students are denied opportunities to develop critical and transforming thinking, they become apathetic and passive. Not so at IIPE. Participants were engaged and active as they constructed the reality of the 2013 theme: “Towards a Possible World Free from Violence: Pedagogies, Proposals and Politics for Human Rights and Peace.”

A Perfect Storm: *Cooperation, community, content, culture, Chantal?*

What makes IIPE work as a critical-thinking community? In 2013, there was a perfect storm of components. Energy and organizational expertise came from members of the IIPE staff, Tony Jenkins (Global Director/Coordinator) and Janet Gerson (Education Director). Host-organizers Anita Yudkin Suliveres, Anaida Pascual Moran, and Lourdes Torres Santos tirelessly offered inspiring vision, hard work, and warm welcomes along with their team at the UNESCO Chair in Peace Education at the University of Puerto Rico. They planned for years and hosted enthusiastically, even managing to send Hurricane Chantal on her way around, rather than through the island. The passionate culture, food, music, and diversity—along with the ongoing anti-colonial struggles—of the Puerto Rican people became part of IIPE learning as well. Content was rich, relevant, and reflectively developed.

Core to the community is the community itself: seventy individuals from over twenty countries, creating a temporary village with far-reaching implications. Participating with this dedicated and diverse team of academics, student volunteers, teachers, researchers, and activists, one feels

another world *IS* possible.

The plenary gatherings and workshops offered by participants helped community members construct multiple paths to peacebuilding. Too numerous to detail all aspects of the program here, four highlights will allow readers to construct their own impressions of IPE. I have made these selections with teachers and community organizers in mind. Each of the four examples depicts underserved, under-recognized, or disempowered women, men, and youth finding their voices in active community projects, creatively imagined and enacted in step-wise processes. To honor the host community, all examples are from Puerto Rico, with readily transferrable global applications.

Judith Conde Pacheco (Vieques, Puerto Rico): *Diary Writers of Peace Made Invisible by History*

Co-founder of the Vieques Women’s Alliance, Judith Conde Pacheco described the role of women of Vieques as they protested the presence of the United States Navy on their island east of Puerto Rico. Military maneuvers took place near civilian areas, health of civilians deteriorated, and long-term heavy-metal residue still pollutes the island. Women started to document the impact of the military on their lives, becoming—for once—visible after years of “invisibility.” One woman wrote that she would “nunca (never)” strike, volunteering instead to cook for protesters. As conditions for civilians deteriorated, however, she started banging her cooking pot at demonstrations to protest the imposed curfew.

Women organized because they perceived risk to their families and communities, overcoming their fear of commonly perceived stigmas against protesters. The contributions of everyone—women, men, and children—were respected. They determined as a group who would be arrested and who could not. Women elders volunteered to risk arrest, noting their children were grown and their husbands could take care of themselves. Judith noted that her own child learned to walk and talk protesting in front of the Camp Garcia gate. A feminist and inclusive ideology gave face and voice to the women of Vieques. Although the Navy “left” in 2003, numerous unexploded ordinances remain, cancer rates are high, and the struggle continues.

The transformational actions of the women, men, and youth of Vieques can inspire others to conduct such grass-roots and multifaceted social justice work. Entire families were engaged. Youth and elders played unique and complementary roles. Women’s voices were strengthened in the diary process. The story of nonviolent civil protest and the struggle for human rights on Vieques is one that should be explored by students and community activists, who can research via news accounts and various web resources and apply the Vieques solutions to local and global problems they face. (See links below.)

Liliana Cruz and Yara Lari Gorbea Colon (San Juan, Puerto Rico): *Theatre for Building Another Possible World.*

Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by Brazilian Augusto Boal, integrating the roles of actor and spectator into “spect-actors.” This format envisions alternate political and social realities and engages participants in political and social action via the arts. Liliana Cruz and

Yara Lari Gobeia Colon (and their high school student troupe) demonstrated with IPE participants various exercises common to Theatre of the Oppressed, allowing participants to enact real-life circumstances, transform the situations, and build ideal images of a better possible world.

First, participants struck poses representing oppressive situations that violate rights expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Next, participants mirrored partners' poses, worked in groups to clarify the departures from human rights, and re-interpreted the problems represented. Through group discussion and exercises, actor-participants re-worked their poses and scenes, portraying the possible world free of violence and abuse.

Students in the youth theatre workshop "Pintar Teatraliz(ando)" worked with adult participants to clarify and enrich such scenes. Later in the day, donning masks they had created, these youthful actors presented scenes they wrote and revised, transforming human rights abuses to scenes of respect, dignity, and cooperation.

This two-part presentation at IPE engaged adult peace educators in the Theatre-of-the-Oppressed process. The workshop called on us to experience the process physically and viscerally, and also to analyze its educational power critically with fellow educators. Further, we adults were able to query the youth directly about difficulties and benefits of the process. Identifying problems that are relevant to participants is one key to the success of re-enactments and revisions. Building trust in the acting/learning group is another key element. Finally, participants discuss real-world actions that can bring about the ideal-worlds portrayed. Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, such as striking poses and having a partner mirror the pose, having groups mirror each other's portrayals, and using ideas from the group to alter scenes' outcomes are effective tools for any classroom or social action group. (See links below.)

Alexis Massol González and Casa Pueblo (Adjuntas, Puerto Rico): *Sustainable Development, Ecopedagogy, and Peace in Context*

During the two-hour bus ride from San Juan to Adjuntas, Puerto Rican IPE members pointed out landmarks of ongoing struggles on the island, including a wind-farm that does not produce wind, a Monsanto farm intruding on local farmers, and the Jíbaro monument to people of the mountains. Arriving at Casa Pueblo, we revived ourselves with artisan shade-grown coffee, one of the sustainable initiatives of this ecologically conscious organization started in 1980 as a cultural center. Our hosts, founder Alexis Massol González and his family and staff, detailed the history of Casa Pueblo, starting with their efforts to stop open-pit copper mining in the area in the 1980s. The story is a textbook case of nonviolent social action for human rights that should be in textbooks!

Planning the first anti-mining demonstration was frustrating: after weeks of publicizing and organizing, only one person showed up. They revamped their strategy, engaging youth. Shortly thereafter, 800 students formed anti-mine slogans that were photographed from above by journalists in helicopters. By the end of the successful campaign that included cultural groups, students, environmentalists, scientists, and religious groups, 10,000 people turned out to

celebrate. Instead of falling apart or forming factions as many movements do, this activist community evolved from protest to proposal, petitioning for the creation of Bosque del Pueblo, a 748-acre forest preserve that was granted in 1996.

The struggle was not over, however. Government leaders proposed a gas pipeline that would destroy the pristine mountain preserve. Again the Casa Pueblo community mobilized to defeat the ill-conceived pipeline, opposed by over two-thirds of Puerto Rico's population but pushed forward by the governor. Protesters learned that contracts had been awarded to friends of the governor who lacked pipeline-building experience. Scientists in the movement (among them sons of Massol González) demonstrated that copper deposits would form corrosive oxides; the pipeline was also in an active seismic zone, making it unstable ecologically. The pipeline was defeated.

Using a process of governing themselves as equals and striving for consensus, Casa Pueblo activists have created a network that includes a community school with art classes and a symphony orchestra. To provide energy independence, solar panels were installed. The butterfly garden thrives. In August 2013, Bosque Escuela (Forest School) was inaugurated. "People are dominated when made dependent," Alexis says, and Casa Pueblo uses initiatives such as coffee sales, sales of local artisans' work, and radio station WOQT (1020 AM), to fund sustainable programs. The community itself is in charge of managing the government preserve. For his work with his community to protect the environment and create ecologically sustainable cultural, educational ecological and economic projects, Alexis was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2002.

This IPE experience energized critical and creative thinking in numerous ways. First, the environmental commentary by local peace educators helped visitors understand numerous agricultural and ecological obstacles and ongoing struggles on the island. As Alexis enumerated the steps taken by his community to reclaim the beautiful mountainous landscape, we were able to see tangible fruits of the movements' struggles, from delicious coffee to vibrant teaching and tourism facilities. Finally, by hiking the Bosque del Pueblo, IPE participants viewed first-hand the landscape preserved from destructive mining and ill-conceived pipeline. Community activists and peace builders should see and evaluate such success stories. This visit by IPE participants gave us hand-on experience of an ongoing community partnership building sustainable, ecological, educational, and socially just initiatives in the mountains of Puerto Rico. This example can be replicated if our students and others know the story of Casa Pueblo. (See links below.)

Kanti Mendez Aramburu (San Juan, Puerto Rico): *Nuestra Escuela (Our School): An Alternate Model to Violence*

In this plenary presentation, Kanti Mendez Aramburu asked us to imagine a school whose core mission is love. Imagine a school that is family. Imagine a school where there are no grades, where sports are intense but not overly competitive, where students are motivated to learn. Imagine a school in which students who had been abandoned by the school system find success and graduate, having created their own personally compelling curricula. Such a school exists:

Nuestra Escuela (Our School). Inspired by the vision of founder Justo Méndez Arámburu, Nuestra Escuela is an alternative school founded in 2000, whose students are referred by the education department, families, or by request of the students themselves. Acknowledging that education is a basic human right, Kanti explained how Nuestra Escuela invests human, social, and cultural capital to “develop social responsibility and citizenship,” developing attitudes among students that inspire them to reject violence and build their communities on a basis of love and respect.

Students who come to Nuestra Escuela have been abandoned and damaged by the system. Pillars of love, family, nation, freedom and a service model surround these youth in a cocoon of safety and healing. Staff members recognize students’ life experiences, often lived in conditions of violence and dysfunction. Incoming students participate in a three-day retreat to help them process their life experiences and goals for their futures. With the help of teacher guides, students create a personalized education asking questions like “Who am I? What do I want to do? How to do it?”

The school’s 98% retention rate is testament to the efficacy of the school’s emphasis on individualized education that is personal and relevant, enabling students to “recover the capacity to dream and turn dreams into reality.” Service and practical projects include gardens, fisheries, and business initiatives. Recognized as an Exemplary Program by the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, it is also deemed a “Best Practice Project” by the U.S. Department of Education. Practicing democratic education, Nuestra Escuela’s program enriches the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of its students in Caguas, Loiza, Vieques, and Culebra, Puerto Rico. Nuestra Escuela shows that alternative education can be effective with diverse learners from a variety of socio-economic settings. Ask teaches, staff, students, and families what is at the core of Nuestra Escuela’s success? Love.

The IPE process at plenary workshops is uniquely active. Following presentations, audience members meet in small groups to formulate questions for presenters. My small group asked Kanti to “elucidate the steps for creating social programs of hope even in hopeless situations.” She promptly did so, outlining judicial, familial, and education practices the school employs so effectively. Students and teachers should know about Nuestra Escuela. (See links below.)

IPE as Freirean Community

Realizing the education system is too often instrumental in preparing compliant, silent masses, Paulo Freire urged an education model that allows students to construct and create relevant, empowering knowledge in cooperation with teachers and peers willing to create democratic and dynamic spaces for these efforts to take place. The IPE community created such spaces, allowing participants to weave a critically-and creatively-thinking community from their multiple backgrounds, interests, and experiences.

As seen above, plenaries and workshops alike provided opportunities for active engagement allowing participants to construct knowledge through critical and cooperative thinking. The plenary format was far from passive. Participants worked actively and cooperatively to sift

through multiple questions. This practice enabled listeners to analyze and synthesize information from several perspectives before choosing one question to represent the group's collective interest. Workshops allowed participants to try projects, games, and exercises and reflect on how to employ them in school and community settings. Many days ended in reflection groups in which we shared our optimism based on the case studies about which we had learned and the educational activities we had created and analyzed together. IPE ended with a process of evaluation and extension: inviting participants to continue contact and create initiatives. Overall, participants engaged in the critical, creative, and cooperative thinking from dawn to dusk, and beyond. Online communication continues, months after the close of the conference. Thus, IPE provided not only the content of peace education and peacebuilding initiatives, but also the model of teaching and learning about peace.

Esperanza (Hope): Transformative optimism for a peaceful future

This account mentions only four initiatives shared at IPE, chosen for their Puerto Rican origins, focus on grassroots participation, stepwise and evaluative approaches to social-justice issues, and success in empowering underserved women, men, and youth. IPE participants shared so much more work that upholds human rights and builds peace using diverse approaches. There are the fourth graders taking action against the death penalty in Puerto Rico. There is the school for refugees in Burundi. There is the cosmetology school economic cooperative in Puerto Rico. There is the democratizing art project in Spain's Basque Country.

There are student leaders running school wide human-rights initiatives in the United States from Newtown Square, Pennsylvania to Washington, D.C. to Berkeley, California. There is the Kinokuni Children's village, a democratic eco-school in Japan. There is Growing Green, an educational model for children with autism and other behavioral differences. There are the conflict resolution initiatives in Sri Lanka. There is the documentary *Singers in the Band*, helping viewers connect modern-day sex trafficking with the U.S. military. Countless other initiatives deserve mention.

How does such a gathering as IPE enhance peace education and peacebuilding? Freire emphasizes the importance of hope combined with critical understanding of realities. Thus, Freirean scholar Cesar Rossatto calls for us to embrace *transformative optimism*: awareness of our potential for being effective actors in collective and critical efforts for transformation and change (Bajaj, 2008). The IPE theme pointed participants "towards a possible world free from violence." Having shared stories, employed methodologies, and developed initiatives, participants have returned to their far-flung homes empowered to build this possible world. Readers can employ activism examples and pedagogical formats from IPE with students and colleagues, and use the links below to investigate—and build—the world that is possible.

About the Author:

Susan Gelber Cannon, is an educator with over thirty years of classroom experience in the United States and overseas. She has trained teachers in China and Japan and at international conferences to develop teaching methods to empower students to think, care, and act as honorable global citizens. She teaches middle school history, English, Model UN, and debate at The Episcopal Academy in Pennsylvania, United States. Her book *Think, Care, Act: Teaching for a Peaceful Future* was published in 2011. Her website www.teachforpeace.org provides resources in character, global, multicultural, and peace education. She blogs at <http://thinkcareact.blogspot.com>.

Links:

International Institute on Peace Education: <http://www.i-i-p-e.org/index.html>

Catedra UNESCO de Educacion para la Paz, Universida de Puerto Rico, Rio Pedro
Google Translated Page: What is UNESCO Chair --Education for Peace? Follow Links on left:
<http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://unescopaz.uprrp.edu/&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dunescopaz%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den>

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in PDF format:
http://www.users.humboldt.edu/jwpowell/edreformFreire_pedagogy.pdf

<http://organizingforpower.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/games-theater-of-oppressed.pdf>

History of Theatre of the Oppressed and explanations of methods and games:

<http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/en/index.php?nodeID=3>

Theatre of the Oppressed: Theatre Tree explaining various aspects of TO.

Inside Story Americas: Special Report on Vieques (Al-Jazeera-YouTube video- 4 mins.)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x0axMni8ck>

History of the Navy in Puerto Rico (website with links to variety of articles) <http://www.vieques-island.com/navy/>

Casa Pueblo leads resistance to Governor's gas pipeline: NPR Radio story
<http://www.npr.org/2011/08/25/139801215/puerto-rican-governor-faces-opposition-to-pipeline>

Goldman Prize to Casa Pueblo founder: <http://www.goldmanprize.org/2002/islands>

Nuestra Escuela website (in Spanish): <http://www.nuestraescuela.org>

Nuestra Escuela (our school) website and philosophy: <http://www.nuestraescuela.org/about-us/what-is-nuestra-escuela-our-mission-of-love.html>

Universal Declaration of Human Rights documents and curricula:
<http://teachforpeace.org/care/Universal-Declaration-of-Human-Rights>

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