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# I'd Rather Teach Peace: An Autoethnographic Account of the Nonviolent Communication and Peace Course

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## **I'd Rather Teach Peace: An Autoethnographic Account of the Nonviolent Communication and Peace Course**

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## **I'D RATHER TEACH PEACE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AND PEACE COURSE**

### **Abstract**

This autoethnography narrates the story of how I taught the *Nonviolent Communication and Peace* course to undergraduate students at an urban university in the midst of a densely populated military region in the U.S. I describe what it feels like to be in the peace class from the student and professor's points of view. I invite readers to consider creative options for teaching and learning about peace, including: insight meditation, cultivating peace attitudes/behavior from readings about inspirational peace people, developing nonviolent communication skills, and connecting students with their local world through a personal and creative peace project. Finally, I include reflection questions for those that want to delve deeper into peace. The *Nonviolent Communication and Peace* course syllabus is available from the author upon request.

### **I'd Rather Teach Peace**

We are surrounded by military forces! Drive 12 minutes north of the campus where I teach and enter the world's largest naval station: *Naval Station Norfolk*. Head north 36 minutes across the James River and you hear the jets of *Langley Air Force Base*. Sixteen minutes west of campus is the *U.S. Joint Forces Command*, and 36 minutes east, near the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, is *Naval Air Station Oceana*. Military culture permeates the region, and the parlance of deployment, tour of duty, ships, subs, fighter jets, and droids is pervasive for students that are serving, and/or who have family/friends serving, in the military. Most students agree that the

growing global crises, such as terrorism, racism, colonialism, economic/religious wars, and environmental degradation, threaten life on the planet. Students also agree that military forces are needed to manage/resolve these issues through violence when necessary. Peace is considered a noble ideal, not a realistic option.

As a professor working in a region surrounded by military forces for over twenty years, I felt a growing need to offer students a realistic alternative to the many forms of violence in society such as personal, group, organizational, and military violence. Reading Coleman McCarthy's (2002) book *I'd Rather Teach Peace* challenged me to make the world a better place by teaching peace. I responded by developing and teaching the *Nonviolent Communication and Peace* class to a small group of undergraduates for the first time in 2010, teaching the course every year since that time. My intention in this essay is to invite readers to consider creative options for teaching/learning about peace by: *autoethnographically narrating* (Wall, 2006) a sense of what it means to be in the peace class from student and professor viewpoints, providing inspiration/advice for peace teachers, and posing questions for deeper reflection.

## **The Nonviolent Communication and Peace Class**

### **Insight Meditation**

On the first day of the semester, I [professor] arrive to class just in time to write the words *Meditation: Peace* on the white board while I hear students taking their seats behind me. I feel a sense of trepidation, asking myself: who am I to teach meditation? I convince myself to carry on because I know that classroom meditation can: reduce stress and turn on learning centers like attention and insight (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2015), but I still feel a sense of anxiety about how students will respond.

I [student] rushed up the steps, around the corner, and into room 3028. As I sat down in an empty desk in the back of class, I noticed a bearded professor writing on the whiteboard: *Meditation: Peace*. He turned and said, "Peace...I'm Dr. B...I invite you to turn off your digital devices and turn on to your inner world by meditating with me on the word peace." He gave us some instructions on how to meditate, and after a few minutes I heard, "It's time to bring your meditation to a close...take a deep breath...open your eyes...I invite you to share something from your meditation." After meditating I felt relaxed, and in our class discussion that followed, I discovered that peace is more than a relaxed feeling. Peace is also a positive force for doing good.

In the peace class, we meditate at the beginning of every class to provide students with a direct first-person experience about a peace topic. Meditation, and the discussion that follows, assists us in transitioning from our often busy out-of-class lives to our in-class focus on slowing down and learning about peace. After a few class meditations, most students look forward to our meditation time. Informally, some students report that it is the most valuable skill they learned in the class. Further rationale, instruction, and benefits of classroom meditation are discussed in (Baesler, 2015). Meditation can become a path that supports inner and world peace (Tan, 2012).

For reflection: How does the way you begin your class facilitate a relaxed environment conducive to learning? Do you have a personal meditation practice; if so, how might you adapt some part of it for the classroom?

### **Cultivating Peaceful Attitudes/Behavior from Readings about Inspirational Peace People**

I [professor] post an electronic-copy of McCarthy's (2014) peace readings for a *Class of Nonviolence* that he compiled while teaching peace to over 7,000 students in high schools, universities, and prisons since the 1980's. These short readings, adapted from peace people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Gene Sharp, and Joan Baez, serve as our core class readings.

To connect students with the peace people and ideas from the class readings, they create a *peace card* (a three by five-inch index card) for each reading. On one side of the card, students write a quote to meditate on, and record how to apply the quote to their everyday life. On the reverse side of the card, students pose a question for class discussion, and identify a related internet resource. Students meet in *peace groups* to share something from their peace card in our communal search for truth (Palmer, 1998). Then, we listen to each group share one of their learnings with the class. In the next section, a student describes their experience of preparing and sharing a peace card from one of the course readings.

To prepare for class today, I [student] chose a quote from the Dorothy Day reading: "What we would like to do is change the world to make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves..." I meditated and wondered, "What could I do for people around campus that lack these basic needs?" I went on-line and found the *Norfolk Catholic Worker* three blocks from campus. After sharing this information with my group, one person said that they volunteer on the *Catholic Worker* soup line on Thursday mornings. Our group decided to invite classmates to join us Saturday morning to check out the *Catholic Worker*. Maybe we can do some good for others like Dorothy Day did.

Peace people come alive through meditating on their words and applying their ideas to everyday life. The meaning of *peace* deepens through questioning and connecting peace ideas to other resources. Students experience a sense of satisfaction and comradery when contributing and discovering insights about peace within small groups. We are laying a foundation, building the structural support, for a community of peace (Chappell, 2017).

For reflection: What resources do you use to engage students in learning about peace? What are the core principles of peace and nonviolence that every student should know?

### **Developing Nonviolent Communication Skills**

I [professor] introduce students to Rosenberg's (2005) method of nonviolent communication as a process of making life more wonderful by connecting with others at the heart level to facilitate natural giving. I use readings, video, and role-play to teach students the nonviolent communication skills of: observation, feelings, needs, requests, and empathy. There is some empirical support for the effectiveness of teaching nonviolent communication in the classroom

(Baesler & Lauricella, 2013). While nonviolent communication is challenging to learn because of our culturally conditioning that normalizes verbal violence, communicating nonviolently is a viable path to peace that meets basic human needs (Max-Neef, 1991).

I create two images for meditation and role-play today based on Rosenberg's (2005) animal imagery: a long-necked giraffe that appears to be dancing (the giraffe's large heart is associated with *heart-felt* nonviolent communication), and a gray and black scruffy jackal (the jackal's *scavenger* image is associated with violent communication). Listen as a student describes how I introduce and use these two characters to teach nonviolent communication in class.

Today we meditated on giraffes and jackals. I [student] see the animals on the African savannah, but I don't see a connection to peace. While discussing the images in class, I learned that jackals judge and giraffes observe. After Dr. B. provided some examples of *giraffe observations* and *jackal judgments*, he asked us to create our own observation from a recent conflict. "Who wants to test their observation?" I volunteered: "My roommate plays irritating music." Dr. B. held up an image of a jackal and gave a howl. He said, "The phrase 'irritating music' is a judgment." After some discussion, we identified the *loudness of the music while I'm studying* as an observation, and Dr. B. lifted the image of a dancing giraffe in approval. I now see how easy it is to talk like the violent judging jackal, and how challenging it is to talk like the nonviolent giraffe.

For reflection: How often do you inadvertently use jackal talk (e.g., cajole, persuade, coerce) to reach your goals? How can you explore nonviolent communication options to everyday conflicts?

### **Connecting Students with the Local World through a Personal and Creative Peace Project**

The peace project is a chance for students to exercise their creativity. Students discover a peace topic by meditating on peace AND... music, art, dance, economics, education, history, politics, relationships, organizations, religion, spirituality...After choosing a topic, students explore a *bibliography of peace resources*. These resources are intended to arouse curiosity and launch students on a path of discovery. Students write a proposal for their peace project that includes: personal motivation, method, flow chart of activities, and an evaluation rubric. Peace projects and presentations utilize a variety of methods/forms *from traditional* literature reviews, surveys, and case studies, *to creative* scripts, videos, music, comic strips, and poems.

For reflection: Where does your best motivation for undertaking projects come from? What other ways can we facilitate students exploring connections between peace and their everyday life?

### **Summary**

Our peace class of twenty-some students is surrounded by military forces that number in the thousands. In the peace class, *we cultivate an intentional, creative, and discerning approach to engaging the forces of violence*, whether they are military, police, employers, co-workers, teachers, classmates, friends, or family members, by learning to:

- (a) Create an epicenter of inner peace through meditation,
- (b) Cultivate peaceful values and behaviors through the inspiring lives of peace people in our course readings,
- (c) Connect with others at the heart level and meet human needs through nonviolent communication, and
- (d) Engage the local world through a personal and creative peace project.

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