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## Learning Under Fire: Adult Education in the Heat of Conflict

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# Learning Under Fire: Adult Education in the Heat of Conflict

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**Abstract:** *A critical review of the discourses on “conflict” in conflict management education literature revealed an ideological bias and “hidden curriculum” of propaganda, which is heavily influencing social conflict conceptualizations and practices. Workers with adults have an emerging “conflict” pedagogy to develop and draw upon as counterhegemonic. Conflict is re-examined as a critical site of learning.*

“The problem of human conflict is perhaps the most fundamental problem of all time”  
(Bondurant, 1965, p. xv)

It seems impossible to imagine any form of oppression, and resistance to its violence, that is not intimately linked to social conflict. Arguably, from a conflict, culturalist, or postmodernist view, human relations and the human body/mind are a battleground of contested and competing discourses for domination. Bondurant’s Gandhian “peace” discourse conceptualizes *conflict* as the problem of violence. What if conflict itself is habitually being misunderstood, and may better yield fruits for educators/learners when it is distinguished completely from violence? An alternative conceptualization, called the Dominance-Fear-Conflict-Violence (DFCV) cycle is presented at this roundtable as a form for critical re-evaluation of the relationships of these concepts and the phenomena they supposedly describe. Implications of how social conflict is theorized and dealt with in educative sites, from the formal classroom to WTO “teach-ins,” are critical to workers with adults today.

Is it a useful or accurate assumption to believe that the “best” learning takes place in stable, predictable, safe, quiet and peaceful environments – which presumes, that such environments actually exist or can be created? Who benefits from what many schooling advocates label a “peaceable classroom,” “cooperative learning model,” or “safe haven” for pupils (and staff)? Who doesn’t? Are these terms an attempt to manage social conflict or elicit it? Does such managing turn to a superficial volcanic managerialism – where the depths (below) are suppressed, where the friction becomes heat and the lava builds for an opportunity to explode? Why do we have “peace education” and “conflict education” as two competing fields trying to capture

the market on how to best know and deal with social conflict? Does our globalizing world with constant change, border-crossing of peoples, ideologies, cultural and religious values demand a major revision of the “best” learning environment, and the “best” learning required for such a world? Is there a ‘learning under fire’ (in conflict) that is unique, underestimated or avoided by pedagogues? What “conflict” pedagogy exists in adult education roots, that we can draw upon, to assist teaching and learning in the heat of sites of conflict? Is violence, a necessary part of a critical conflict education (CCE), and new conflictwork praxis?

Cross-cultural research has shown that most people have a very negative association with conflict (Duryea, 1992), and would rather avoid it than pursue it as part of healthy community-building and a strong democracy. However, a select few, and often those who hold high-power positions, seem comfortable to “use” conflicts for the management and social control of human relations and the hegemonic “regimes of truth” that construct the body/mind. A growing body of conflict management education (CME)<sup>1</sup> has been entering the northwestern (and Australian) world in the past few decades. With its powerful applications of a social technology of control, CME can be classified as a new social movement, with a ubiquitous “liberal” agenda to change people’s attitude from being “negative” to “conflict-positive.” Is this CME agenda really a progressive “positive” view of social conflict, or a “positive” view of greater management (suppressing) of social conflict?

The CME texts for both youth and adults, make grandiose claims about creating equitable safe

schools and workplaces. They often claim that conflict resolution or management skills are “The Fourth R,” “The Second Coming” and an essential success skill for the 90s. CME teaches how to best conceptualize conflict, best learn about conflict, and how best to train people to handle conflict. The critiques of this new social movement are minimal and unsystematic, with no critical investigation of how “conflict” itself may need to be deconstructed in relation to the DFCV cycle. Virtually no CME theorist or practitioner has engaged in a critical examination of the actual pedagogy and assumptions that are foundational to its CME pedagogy – nor, have they engaged in a discussion of conflict as a critical site of learning. Critical pedagogies, a sociological conflict perspective and poststructuralist discourses have been left out of CME pedagogy investigated in the teaching manuals (Fisher, 2000). The purpose of this session is to encourage a lively questioning and critical challenge of the hegemonic discourses (text and images) that are portrayed in a sample of 22 contemporary conflict resolution/ management handbooks and training manuals. CCE is offered as a counterhegemonic to CME discourses on social conflict and pedagogy.

Some questions posed in this session include: 1) What involvement do adult educators and educators in continuing/higher education have in CME? 2) What are the realities and possibilities of complicity in reproducing violence in that involvement? 3)

What theory and guidance do adult educators have to draw upon to conceptualize and deal with

learning under the fire of social conflict (e.g., racism, sexism, classism), for teaching in conflict zones, and for critically reflecting on their own (and others’) conflict practices?

### References

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- Fisher, R. M. (2000). *Toward a ‘conflict’ pedagogy: A critical discourse analysis of ‘conflict’ in conflict management education*. Unpublished thesis. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia.

<sup>1</sup>Fisher (2000) defined conflict management education (CME) as “all forms of schooling/training or education, where the aim is to improve understanding conflict and develop skills to handle conflict so as to avoid or minimize violence. Commonly included in this conceptualization of CME here are: conflict (dispute) resolution, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), conflict resolution education, conflict management, negotiation training, conflict studies/science (polemology), peace studies/science, conflict education, peace education, cooperative education, collaborative education, or other variants on these general types.” (p. 16).