A Hermeneutical Study of the Essentialities of Adult Peace Education

Hsiu-Chu Hsu
Northern Illinois University

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Abstract: By including peace courses in graduate programs and essentializing criticality, nonviolence, and wholistic views, as represented by Paulo Freire, Mahatma Gandhi, and Thich Naht Hanh, respectively, adult education can promote a more peaceful society and include peace education as a subfield.

Like the violent twentieth century, the beginning of the twenty-first is also imbued with violence. The 9/11 tragedy sparked violence in Afghanistan and Iraq. We seem to have achieved unprecedented civilization, but such an achievement is more material than spiritual. Countries with advanced weapons have become ruthless in dealing with conflicts, falsely secure in the knowledge of their material advantage. Education may not be a panacea, but it is still one of the basic long-term roads to achieving peace. Historically, adult education arose to respond to social needs by inducing both individual and social change; many adult educators recognize these social roots (Adult Learning, 1991; Adults Learning, 2003). Even though critical adult educators traditionally address social justice, components of peace, they seldom directly discuss the concept of peace and its implications for adult education. To raise the awareness of peace in adult education, its graduate programs should include peace courses to prepare adult educators to integrate peace components into their practice. To explore the essential elements of adult peace education, this study examines three theorists, Paulo Freire, Mahatma Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh, representatives of the critical, nonviolent, and wholistic elements identified as necessary in preliminary literature reviews. The examination focuses on four research questions: how they view reality and human potential; how they view distortions of the human condition; what methods they promote for achieving peace; and what their views imply for adult peace education.

Theoretical Foundation

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) investigates the phenomena of understanding, interpretation, historicality, linguisticality, hermeneutical circles, and conversational question/answer dialetics. For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are our basic cognitive activities, not methodological techniques but "the original character of the being of human life itself" and "the basic structure of our experience of life" (1975, p. 230; 1984, p. 58). Understanding is the fusion of horizons (visions) of the text and the reader. The horizon, constructed by prestructures, accumulative experiences and tradition, is meant to be fluid, constantly shifting and changing, as it is challenged, invited, and reshaped by the differences between text and reader (1975). Through recognition of paradox and conflict, the two dissolve paradox and move beyond difference (He, 2002). On the other hand, interpretation is not an act "subsequent to understanding" but always a part of understanding (Gadamer, 1975, p. 274). In our "seeing, hearing, receiving," and extracting meaning from something, we interpret it (Gadamer, 1984, p. 59). Hence "interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 274). Interpretation does not duplicate the original meaning of the text but emphasize the meaning of the text for the reader/interpreter and recognize the interpreter as a product of history, his or her understanding and interpretation bound by

historicality, inherited and lived tradition. Readers bring their historical "assumptions, standards, expectations and aspirations" as they seek to make sense of texts-- writings, art works, "historical events," "practices, and social conflicts," produced under the influence of history and tradition (Warnke, 1994, p. 207, 208). Understanding hermeneutical historicality, readers recognize that no understanding or interpretation can be objective (Ricoeur, 1981). Even the language and symbols that we construct to explain or interpret the texts or phenomena are bound by the same historicality and therefore loaded with presuppositions. Understanding language's centrality and historically conditioned nature, readers will inquire into its history and origin when they try to understand and interpret texts (Weinsheimer, 1985). The hermeneutic circle, "a circular movement between the parts and the whole of texts," guides their actual understanding and interpretation. Readers interpret a text through an iterative process based on an understanding of its parts within the context of the whole (Kisiel, 1973, p. 276). To discover greater meaning in a text, Gadamer advocates question/answer dialectics: continuously questioning the text, as in conversation. He suggests extending this hermeneutic understanding to our interaction with fellow human beings. Gadamer's principles guide my analysis of writings by Freire, Gandhi, and Hanh, as well as my interpretation of their views.

Criticality—Paulo Freire

Criticality is the basis of any sound knowledge. Paulo Freire views reality from two angles: ontological and existential. Ontologically, he perceives the human vocation as becoming more fully human, an ideal reality. Existentially, he sees humans as struggling through their daily challenges, a practical reality. As he confirms the human ontological vocation, he affirms the human potential to achieve it. His experience of poverty in Brazil during the Great Depression prompted him to analyze political and socio-economic conditions. Political oppression, economic exploitation, or social domination hinders the human vocation. To correct this distortion, people must liberate themselves from oppression to claim their subjectivity and speak their own words. Such freedom can be fostered by problem-posing, dialogue, and praxis, a continuous cycle of reflection and action, to achieve conscientization, the awakening of critical consciousness to realities (Freire, 1998a; 1994a; 1985; 1970). In the face of personal and collective oppression, Friere cultivated hope, something he regarded as a human "ontological need"; the source of this hope was his belief in human potential, humans' capacity to create and recreate knowledge and cultures to transform oppressive realities (1994b, p. 8; 1998b).

Freire's critical approach has three implications for the contemporary world: 1.) psychological and mental; 2) political and socio-economic; and 3.) educational—especially in literacy. Freire's analysis of consciousness has implications for our understanding of depression and other forms of psychological oppression by promoting critical observation of both its nature and patterns of occurrence. Politically and socio-economically his work highlights the urgent need for teaching criticality and critical citizenship. At a time when the wholesale manipulation of information and ideology threatens peace, Freirean problem-posing methods for reading the world and conscientizing reality are still pivotal. In a world where poverty still plagues many areas and scarcity of educational resources makes illiteracy a tool of perpetual political oppression, economic exploitation, and social/cultural domination, Freire's approach allows learners to begin with their own understanding of reality as they seek to take collective/individual action to change that reality --and at the same time learn to read and write.

Nonviolence—Mahatma Gandhi

Nonviolence is the foundation of peace. Gandhi's view of reality, an intertwined trinity of God, Truth, and nonviolence, inspired his leadership in India's struggle against British colonial rule. Gandhi derived the idea of nonviolence from the ancient Hindu teaching of ahimsa, nonviolence. To be nonviolent means embracing compassion toward all beings by avoiding physical, mental, and spiritual harm. Nonviolence is "our supreme duty" (Gandhi, 1971c, p. 59). Gandhi's belief in ahimsa was the religion, the rule, and the breath of his life. Centered on his understanding and belief in God, Gandhi interpreted "the Eternal Law of Truth and Love" as nonviolence (1979c, p.399). Integrating his belief with Indian traditions and other world religion and philosophies, Gandhi characterized God as pervasive, omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, and merciful (1972b, p. 203). The quest for God, the Truth, is the supreme good of life (Gandhi, 1970d, p. 203). The Hindu tradition esteems Truth, perceiving it as the "essence" of God, the base of the world, the foundation of "Righteousness," and "the most sacred of all things" (Gandhi, 1960b, p. 393). He describes himself as a follower of Truth, and his life as experiments with truth (1970d, p. 3). The only way to "seek and find" Truth is through nonviolence, love or compassion, by consciously renouncing our capacity for violence. "[Nonviolence] is the means, and Truth, the end" (Gandhi, 1971c, p. 59). Gandhi defines human potential as humans' partaking of God's nature; as such, people are perfectible, capable of cultivating virtues and of being nonviolent. Gandhi felt the habitual violence distorts human nature, human potential, and God's will for us. Throughout his life, he advocated nonviolence in political, socio-economic, religious, and family life. For example, politically he used nonviolent strategies--civil disobedience, demonstrations, fasting, non-cooperation, and boycotts--to free India from colonial rule. He promoted constructive programs--the abolition of untouchability, Hindu and Muslim unity, and women's participation in political and economic development--to make India a more egalitarian society. He was sustained by his hope and powerful faith in human potential, nonviolence, love, truth, and ultimately God. (Gandhi, 1967d, p. 271).

Gandhi challenges the people and governments of our time to see civil disobedience as constructive, not destructive, as governments tend to perceive it. His nonviolent resistance strategies have influenced peace and freedom movements around the world, including Martin Luther King's civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. In a world darkened by violence, Gandhi's message of nonviolence offers an alternative way of achieving social change, a beam of light.

Wholistic Views—Thich Nhat Hanh

Wholistic views make peace inclusive. Buddhism is one of the traditions that typically celebrate wholistic views. Its views of reality are grounded in the views of interbeingness, impermanence, no-self, and Nirvana. In a philosophy derived from contemplative insights, Buddhism perceives that all things in the cosmos are formed and exist under the basic principle of "Interdependent Co-Arising"—"in dependence, things rise up." The existence of something is a consequence of the convergence of sufficient elements and conditions to bring it into existence and "everything is a result of multiple causes and conditions" (Hanh, 1999a, p. 221). For instance, our existence literally requires the entire universe to support it: parents and grandparents, as well as air, sun, and food. Noted for his peace activism during the Vietnam War and his teachings on peace and spiritual development, Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, describes the interconnectedness of all beings as "inter-beingness," (1987a, p. 87;

1987b; 1991; 1995; 1999a). Like ancient Chinese and Greek sages, Buddhists observe the impermanence of everything except change itself (Hanh, 2002; 1996). People have mixed feeling about change, but Hanh sees the positive side of impermanence: it means that hatred or injustice can be transformed. Rather than seeing a cessation of a certain form of existence, Buddhists see a continuation in impermanence that makes transformation, healing, and liberation possible (Hanh, 1996). Because everything is impermanent, there is no "fixed identity or permanent self"; that is the Buddhist view of "no self" or no "separate self," the Buddhist meaning of "emptiness." (Hanh, 2002, pp. 39, 48; 1996; 1988). Buddhist Nirvana represents the ultimate reality, "our true substance," and "the reality of no birth and no death," the extinction of all "afflictions" and suffering. (Hanh, 1999b, p. 43; 1996, p. 52). One way to reach Nirvana, "peace, stability, and freedom," is through "the extinction of all concepts" (Hanh, 1999b, p. 38; 2002, p. 39; 1999; 1996; 1992). When we can break through the confinement of concepts, we can grasp the ultimate reality directly and liberate ourselves from suffering caused by ideologies. Such a state is possible for all, because all are endowed with Buddha nature, "the nature of awakening" or the capacity "to understand things as they are" (Hanh, 1999a, pp. 6, 52). Through "compassion and understanding," we acknowledge the presence of Buddha's nature within us (Hanh, 2003, p. 29).

Buddhists regard the suffering and distortion of human life as arising from false views of reality, which make us "attribute permanence to that which is impermanent" and suffer from "fear, greed, anger, [and] jealousy" (Hanh, cited in Cartier and Cartier, 2002, p. 130). By developing interbeingness instead of independence, impermanence instead of permanence, and emptiness instead of a separate self, we can achieve a clearer, broader view of reality that transcends our suffering. Hanh's life-long effort is teaching "engaged Buddhism," a practice combining traditional Buddhist practice and "contemporary social concerns": mindfulness, meditation, and nonviolent social action (Hanh, 1987b, p. 85; 1998, p. ix; Eppsteiner, 1998, vii). Three aspects of Hanh's thought contrast starkly with contemporary thinking. First, our time strives for efficiency; Hanh's practice of mindfulness asks us to slow down and to experience life. Second, in a time when religious conflicts seem to be an incurable disease, Hanh's ecumenical understanding shows a hope for mutual connections. Third, our time promotes individuality and independence; the Buddhist perspective of interbeingness sees collectivity and interdependence.

Implications for Adult Peace Education

The three theorists' views of reality are distinctively different in their foci. Freire focuses on human political, social, cultural activities; Gandhi, on our human value system; and Hanh, on the ontological understanding of the nature of the world and life. These foci help people understand the complementary aspects of reality, active, ethical, and ontological. All three theorists affirm people's mental and spiritual potential and trust humans' ability to improve themselves and create a better world. Such an affirmation provides a foundation for peace education: the endeavor to inspire critical judgments on important issues and render wise decisions; to act compassionately; and to foster an understanding that transcends insurmountable differences. These thinkers share a keen awareness of the disadvantaged, the oppressed, and the weak--peasants, outcasts, women, and children—and the limitations imposed upon them in the development of their potential and humanity. Such a focus highlights a major task of peace education, the elimination of obstacles preventing the marginalized from fulfilling their ontological vocation of humanization. Overall, Freire's

critical approach, Gandhi's nonviolent approach, and Hanh's wholistic approach are focused on truth, but each pursues it differently: Freire applies our critical faculty; Gandhi, our ethical capacity; and Hanh, our contemplative ability. None of these methods is only conceptual. They all emphasize action, both individual and collective.

Though not formally trained in adult education, Freire has always been recognized as an adult educator. But Gandhi and Hanh have not, and their thoughts and practices have seldom been discussed in adult education literature. If adult education is not limited to formal programs and adult educators are not defined by formal training but by actual teaching, then both Gandhi and Hanh deserve recognition as adult educators, and their ideas and practices deserve inclusion in adult peace education. Reading their works can be the starting point for promoting peace education. Freire can provide a pedagogical foundation. Gandhi offers rich resources: his own sources (including ancient religious teachings and thinkers like Tolstoy and Thoreau), his voluminous writings, and his heirs in nonviolence resistance: Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela and other peace theorists. Students can be exposed to wholistic thinking not only in the works of Hanh, but in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Gadamer, or works on Native American philosophy, the Gaia hypothesis, and even quantum mechanics.

Critical consciousness is not generated automatically but cultivated through "a critical education effort" (1994, p. 19). Freire's critical pedagogy helped Brazilian peasants change their perspectives. Teaching criticality means exposing learners to writings that examine political or socio-economic issues from perspectives different from mainstream propaganda and modeling critical pedagogy by asking critical peace questions, investigating them through democratic dialogue, and acting on the solutions generated by collective reflection. Critical citizenship is facilitated by increasing learners' ability to analyze political and socio-economic issues, the media, and the environment and to make sound judgments and decisions in both their personal and public life. Critical citizenship can best be taught through popular education, but adult educators need to prepare themselves to incorporate such elements in their practice.

To cultivate cultures of nonviolence, adult educators can begin exploring the theoretical foundation of nonviolence with their students by discussing primary and secondary sources that challenge accepted political and social practices. Forging spiritual force is at the heart of nonviolent practice, but this can be done better experientially rather than cognitively. Experiential learning is, therefore, indispensable to both spiritual development and nonviolent social change. Adopting a specific pilot project can help students address problematic social conditions that concern them, aid them in critically analyzing related policies, and give them practice in collectively strategizing nonviolent action to change the situations. Exploring the nonviolent resistance strategies that formal education typically does not teach will help legitimize them as sound ways to defend social justice. Students should be encouraged to use their specialties to create constructive programs for alleviating poverty, hunger, epidemics, and environmental degradation.

Cultures of peace depend as much on wholistic world views as they do on criticality and attitudes of nonviolence. Wholistic views suggest how diverse ways of knowing can facilitate spiritual growth. Meditation, contemplation, and knowledge from the subconscious have as much to teach us as more rational ways of knowing. Hanh's practice of mindfulness provides a beginning. Both Gandhi's and Hanh's writings suggest the importance of increasing interfaith understanding and unity. Starting with graduate students' rich multi-cultural and religious backgrounds, they can research, publish, and practice together to advance interfaith understanding.

In conclusion, by including peace courses in graduate programs and introducing works rarely represented in adult education, Gadamer's, Gandhi's, and Hanh's, adult educators can promote peace. Collective peace research and practice will influence and enrich strands of adult education theory, opening up a vital subfield of adult education.

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(Complete list available upon request)