# Understanding Popular Education and Arts Based Learning Within Groups Through a Peace Workshop

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**Abstract:** This presentation shares activities and outcomes of a popular education workshop about creating a culture of peace in the world through dialogue and reflection. We examined issues personally, locally, and globally to see where our strengths support or expand peace-making efforts in the community.

**Keywords**: popular education, peace, participatory action research

## Introduction

Popular education supports a pedagogy for liberation where dialogue and reflection can activate social movements (Greene, 2015). The focus for the project was on peacebuilding using community education programs with local leaders in order to create a culture of peace and find nonviolent resolutions to community challenges. We used participatory action research (PAR) for this study to examine how popular education and arts-based learning could be applied to a workshop focused on creating a culture of peace within communities.

This project was developed as a pilot study using popular education and dialogue to engage community members to define and create cultures of peace for themselves. We wanted to work with community educators to grow programs locally, which then reach out globally, promoting world peace one community at a time. The pilot project was designed to test out the workshop approach and methods; therefore, we invited a small group of doctoral students in adult and community education to participate. This presentation reflects findings drawn from the pilot study.

## Definition of Peace

For this project, we defined peace as a nonviolent approach or effort to identify and solve problems in the community before they escalate. Creating peace can come through building community power, raising awareness of oppressive structures and systems, and assisting marginalized populations as they find their voices while learning to confidently speak out for equality and social justice. We sought to create a "culture of peace" and the accompanying

"peace consciousness" that resonates with the concept of transformative learning (Goodman, 2002, p. 185) in raising awareness and shifting the focus "to know that peace is possible" (p. 190).

### Conceptual Framework and Perspective

We drew from our expertise in community education, authentic leadership, and arts-based learning, as well as literature in peace education (Goodman, 2002), popular education (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990), transformative learning (King, 2002; Taylor, 2008), and participatory action research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, Stoecker, 2013).

Sharing experiences and knowledge in community peace building, we used a popular education approach learned from Highlander Research and Education Center. Their mission, "create spaces where people gain knowledge, hope, and courage, expanding ideas of what is possible" (Highlander Mission, n.d.). Popular education engages pedagogical and political principles, often drawing on popular culture, art, music, theater, poetry and other forms, working toward a more democratic and socially-just society. It draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1973), Myles Horton (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990), and others who seek emancipatory learning for communities.

We also used arts-based methods to explore ways to combine art with "inquiry, social engagement and community activism" (Barndt, 2011, p. 146). Connecting personal experiences with the collective vision of a culture of peace, we created storyboards, mind maps, poetry, and song.

### Research Questions

This presentation addresses the three research questions to understand popular education approaches and arts-based learning within the context of the peacebuilding workshop. The **research questions (RQ)** identified for this study included:

RQ# 1: How do participants **define a culture of peace** before, during, and after engaging in a peacebuilding workshop?

RQ# 2: What kinds of **storytelling, artifacts, and rituals** using **arts-based learning** contribute to building a culture of peace?

RQ# 3: How does the use of dialogue and critical reflection support a culture of peace?

**Methods**

During the workshop, five women (four doctoral students and their professor) shared stories, defined terms and contexts, and engaged in arts-based activities focused on creating a culture of peace. Using methods from informal learning, arts-based learning, and participatory action research participants grew as leaders committed to helping create peaceful communities. Each of the five participants came from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, and as such, they each brought a different perspective and lens with which to define peace in the world.

Randy Stoecker (2013) stated that participatory action research (PAR) focuses on being useful, uses diverse methods, and emphasizes collaboration. The PAR cycle focuses on five steps that a researcher should follow to get maximum results. The researcher chooses a question to review and then designs a method to collect data. The data is analyzed and reported so that knowledge growth can be shared. The results of PAR can influence power, knowledge, and action on a specific topic (Stoecker, 2013).

We also used arts-based approaches to be able to communicate what we were learning or experiencing through song and visual arts. Specifically we constructed vision boards (Burton & Lent, 2016) reflecting how we saw our place as peacemakers in the world.

**The Workshop**

The peace workshop occurred for five days spanning two weeks (Friday, Saturday, and Thursday, Friday, Saturday). We met in a variety of locations and visited four different community organizations: a youth home, a domestic violence shelter, a homeless shelter, and a food bank. In each setting, we asked, "how does this organization contribute to a culture of peace within the community?". We then would return to a workshop space to reflect on and debrief the experience through dialogue with each other.

Juliet Merrifield (1997) identified the approach we took to learn as participation, action, and knowledge creation. The approach outlined by Merrifield was experienced through creative projects, dialogue, differences, and critical thought and reflection of the activities. According to Glass (2001), Freire states "knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterized by participatory, open communication focused around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluated consequences" (p. 19).

As the workshop began, we were asked to learn about ourselves. We sought to examine our own assumptions, values, characteristics, and morals prior to looking outward and learning about others. In order to do so, we completed three self-assessment tools: the CliftonStrengths, Enneagrams, and Gallup StrengthsQuest (Cliftton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006). We each shared our findings in order to recognize similarities and differences to others in the group, and how to draw from each other as we worked through the activities that were going to taking place. We believed that if we cannot contribute from the heart and build from one's own strengths, then we cannot contribute successfully to creating an authentic culture of peace.

Participants engaged with the PAR process through journaling, creating a vision board, storytelling, and documenting reflections and observations. In order to capture the data being shared and produced through this experience, we video-recorded the dialogues; we recorded ideas on large papers that were displayed in the room; and we each took personal notes throughout the full workshop. The findings examined in this presentation come from our personal notes and reported reflections from the workshop. The other data has not yet been analyzed.

Each participant defined peace prior to and following the workshop to better understand and analyze her growth in understandings of peace. Participants shared reflective writings approximately six weeks after the workshop. The reflections focused on how the learning had influenced participants' views of peace and how it impacted their professional work. These documents were analyzed for themes related to the research questions.

### Findings

**Defining a Culture of Peace**

As the workshop began, it was a space of testing the boundaries and building trust while sharing surface level ideas of how we each defined a culture of peace. Peace was defined as a non-violent space, an area of action through respect and trust, and the sharing of dialogue through openness and intense listening. There were times during the conversation that the definition and idea of peace became blurred and undescribable forcing the group to reflect through creativity.

Throughout our time together and as we visited area agencies, we were challenged to consider peace through a service-focused and more harmonious lens. One participant stated *"changing your paradigm from peace for self to becoming a peacemaker through service and advocacy feels like the best definition."* While this may or may not be the case, we saw that while much

work needs to be done, there is hope.  Therefore, it was determined that expressing love for others, focusing on togetherness, and embracing cultural differences allows peace to encompass areas and self.

As we brought the workshop to a close, we experienced safety within the group.  We were able to openly and honestly reflect, share, and test out ideas for helping create and sustain communities of peace.  Open dialogue supported growth and developed action steps to help assist with changes that we saw were needed in our community.  We listened to each other, grappled with challenging and contradictory ideas, researched and worked to solve problems that create barriers for peace, and learned to disagree without retribution or hurt feelings.  These understandings challenged us to speak truth to power and to share the experience with others.  We recognized that with a courageous spirit, peace is attainable one voice, one idea, one action at a time.  One participant reminded us, *As adult educators, we must remember differences between nations, cultures, religions, people and their experiences, and moments in time, while at the same time understanding it's really all about people and being human.*

**Building a Culture of Peace**

The journey through this workshop provided us opportunities to be creative, to learn about self, and to express thoughts and an understanding of peace.  We intentionally provided reflective and creative activities at each session.  These activies not only provided topics of conversation, but also gave us pause to not only claim our story, but to transform through it.

Activites that were presented included: an adult coloring page of the world; the creation of a vision board; research articles to share; poetry to recite; a meditation walk; and learning from song lyrics.  The very first impact of these activities was that we all have a different view of what peace looks like, thus demonstrating the need for this workshop.  A participant shared, "I see that there is not one way to believe or understand, but many perspectives and perceptions, per the individual."

Through the StrengthsQuest activity, we learned that we all have different strengths.  As we talked through our similarities and differences, this activity provided an opportunity to discuss how to work together.  One participant shared,

> Getting people to work together requires honesty and humility.  It involves people taking ownership of the wrongs they have done to self and others.  It requires jealousies, insecurities, and hatefulness to be left out of mix.  Most importantly peace requires a person to leave self out of the equation and to be a servant, always, to everyone else.

**Dialogue and Critical Reflection Support Peace**

As we grew through reflection and collaboration, we were better able to understand how critical trusting relationships and authentic actions are to building meaningful relationships and developing a culture of peace. One participate shared, "It is better to act in good faith and trust the process of education, collaboration, democracy, and leadership, than to be afraid."

Our time together, while brief, allowed us the ability to explore peace and to showe us that to nuture peace, we have to be able to embrace differences and work toward collective unity. As stated by a participant,

> Maybe I now define peace as a unifying force that makes us want to get along with others, regardless of our beliefs. I don't expect everyone to agree with me, and don't expect to agree with others all the time. But working out a way of getting along that is calm and reinforces unity makes a world of difference.

## Implications and Conclusions

**Benefits to the Discipline and Practice**

Within adult and community education, the focus is often on training and learning within formal and vocational settings. This proposed program shifts the focus to community and local leaders to encourage mentors toward building a culture of peace. Curriculum design focuses on ways that communities come together around developing a culture of peace. Through PAR, arts-based learning, dialogue, and popular education, stakeholders can work together to solve community issues in a peaceful way of understanding the problem to impact change with nonviolent action. This program can serve as an example by sharing it further through publications and conference presentations.

**Impact on Scholarship**

Kelsay and Zamani-Gallaher (2014) stated that the community educator assists in advancing academic achievement by providing engagement in educational activities in acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies through persistence and attainment of educational objectives beyond a formal academic environment. This can be accomplished through informal learning, popular education, and participatory action research that focuses on academic excellence, diversity awareness, and meaningful relationships.

This pilot project provided an example of graduate students participating in an immersive program within the community. They can grow their skills by applying methods, techniques, and theories as studied in coursework, thus providing research opportunities

focused as immersive learning opportunities, dissertation studies, practicums, or internships for the graduate students as the project progresses.  This workshop reminded us of the value of starting small and being willing to immerse ourselves into a challenge of social intelligence, competence, and at times uncomfortable realities, all in an effort to connect on a different level with self and others to create an understanding and practice of peace.

One participant summed up the learning from this experience:

> For me this showed that I am a scholar, educator and leader that must change my paradigm through acts of servant leadership.  By claiming that peace is an action of love to bring people together it forces forgiveness, critical conversations, and a need to understand and embrace many cultures.

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