Educating Peace Professionals through Experiential Learning: The Value of Fieldwork

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Abstract
There are new initiatives in the field of educating peacebuilders so that the classroom and the field are mutually informing one another. The artificial separation of these different locations of learning has given advantage to the academic setting over local knowledge learned in context. This paper addresses that dichotomy with evidence of our approach that bridges the academic and field contexts so that students who become peacebuilding professionals gain from both sources of knowledge. In addition, the use of a Participatory Action Research approach (PAR) assures that local grassroots peacebuilders contribute to and benefit from this mutually beneficial learning experience. Cultural orientations are noticed and addressed as all involved become sensitized to the many variations of perspective and learn to appreciate what each has to offer to conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Keywords: peace education, experiential learning, conflict transformation, peace professionals

Introduction

In this article, we demonstrate the importance of enhancing traditional classroom learning with fieldwork experiences. We believe there is a need for peacebuilding students, who will become professionals, to be familiar with the theories that underpin the field in combination with real-life applications in order to develop as scholar-practitioners. Being peacebuilding scholar-practitioners and educators ourselves, we have been working at the nexus of research, practice, and education. We draw from different disciplines to inform our work and thus our teaching, including social psychology, anthropology, communication, and conflict resolution. Our research orientation favors Participatory Action Research (PAR) and this philosophical decision manifests in how we engage with our partners in the field, modeling by example what and how we teach (Chevalier & Buckles 2019).

Our approach is informed by the more than 10 years of fieldwork that we have conducted, and continue to conduct, mostly in Colombia, among grassroots peacebuilders who seek to negotiate spaces of peace in the middle of violent conflicts. The educational journey we propose is centered in the field, which we conceive as the area where local knowledge about conflict and conflict transformation takes place. We designed a peacebuilding practicum course where students can learn about the theory and practice of peace and conflict resolution, both in the classroom and in the field, as part of the master's program in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University, where

Dr. Fisher-Yoshida is director, and both authors are faculty. In this article, we share reflections from students who validate how this approach has shaped their learning.

Bridging Theory and Practice

We all seek knowledge to transform our realities. We produce, obtain, and share knowledge so that the human experience corresponds more to individual and collective desires for basic needs such as freedom, order, human security, pleasure, and beauty. Theories have been produced about how humans meet these needs politically, economically, and through war and peace, since at least the birth of the academy in ancient Greece. For the Greeks, the establishment of the academy and the lyceum were meant for the transformation of the world. To them we owe the idea of a government that represents different sectors of society; to them we owe the idea of democracy. Additionally, if we think of the role of theoretical work in more recent times, we find that one of the legacies of the Enlightenment thinkers is that theory becomes valid only if it has consequences in the concrete world. To Montesquieu (Montesquieu 1989), Hobbes (Hobbes 1982), Kant (Kant 1991), and Locke (Locke 1988), we owe the birth of the State as we know it and the idea that human beings are equal in their capacity to reason and thus apt to choose who is fit to represent their interests in government.

The making of theory and its application to the physical world is inextricably associated with everyday, ordinary human needs. Indeed, it is through our understanding of constraint that we seek freedom, of chaos that we strive for order, of vulnerability that we want human security, and of boredom and futility that we aspire for pleasure and beauty. Our knowledge of these experiences is nourished by our concrete everyday lives and also by what our families, friends, acquaintances, tell us about them. The knowledge and practice associated with meeting basic human needs are nourished by individual and collective everyday experience, and this is what made Paulo Freire conclude that education comes from a communion among history, the world, and human beings—all interacting in a particular moment and *in context* (Freire 2018).

Out of this communion, educational systems have been constructed. Some are formal and others are not, but ultimately, humans have learned to navigate and transform their societies, including their conflicts, through concrete representations of knowledge/theory in practice. Given this, we hold that if knowledge/theory is central for the transformation of societies, and the process of sharing knowledge, i.e., education, is communal—then education must be an experiential and collective endeavor. Our experiential learning model is informed by these premises.

While doing fieldwork research and practice in conflict zones for more than 10 years, we have always thought of how to integrate our practice-oriented research in our teaching in the classroom. As much as we are interested in teaching to our students the fundamental theory and method in the fields of peace and conflict studies, we are also concerned with how to do this in a way that the learning becomes practice-oriented and transformative. When we teach, we are interested in creating spaces where learning is most effective. Our objective is for students to learn theory and method in a way that allows them to apply it to the field, to their practice.

Thinking about how we have learned and applied peacebuilding strategies, much of which is documented academically (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021) (Lopez and Fisher-Yoshida 2024), we arrived at the conclusion that it is the field—in communion with the people that inhabit it—that has proven to be an exceptional learning space. It was with this in mind that we designed our fieldwork course that incorporates theory and method, heavily centered in fieldwork experiences, so that students experiment with theory and its application to real-life conflicts. The course has proven to be a rich pedagogical experience for our students, for grassroots peacebuilders, and for us as peacebuilding practitioners and educators.

The Relevancy of "the Field" in Education

You would ask, why the centrality of "the field"? Think of any violent conflict: where does it develop and where do people come to navigate it, to transform it? It is *in the field*. Violent conflicts are not abstract; *they are lived*. Think of the field as a stage—the stage where conflicts develop, are navigated, and are ultimately resolved. There is practical knowledge in the field that if identified, analyzed, and disseminated, can be used to strengthen the work of peacebuilding practitioners in conflict zones, and to ultimately bring more peaceful spaces to a world that screams for peace.

There are two areas of knowledge that we have identified in the field, which we have documented and that are central to our peacebuilding experiential teaching. We call these two areas of knowledge *conflict knowledge* and *peace knowledge*. We define conflict knowledge as "firsthand, contextual knowledge of conflict that is rooted in and specific to particular cultures and societies" (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021, 35). Peace knowledge refers to the "contextual knowledge of specific peacebuilding and peacekeeping strategies that are rooted in and specific to particular cultures and societies" (idem).

The field is full of information about conflict but less so with the foundations for sustainable peace (Coleman 2019). Indeed, "violent conflicts are contextual […] they are specific to a place, a time, and also, to specific groups of people with all of their inherent cultural norms and social dynamics" (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021, 35). If peacebuilding education is done in the abstract, i.e., away from the field, practitioners miss the cultural nuances that are central to the conflict as well as to its potential transformation. In our book titled *Redefining Theory and Practice to Guide Social Transformation* (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021), we intentionally included seven grassroots peacebuilders from Medellin, Colombia, whom we have been working with, as co-authors. This further supports our orientation that what we bring from the academy comes to life when in partnership with the people who inhabit these contexts who can bring with them their access to the local knowledge about the cultural and social dynamics. Through their lives they lived the experiences to more intimately understand the root causes of the conflict, the ways it is recreated over time, and most importantly, their informed *responses on how to transform them* (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021, 35)

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Thus, coming closer to the field, entering in conversation with the people who inhabit conflict zones, allows peacebuilding practitioners to engage in deeper analysis of the conflict at hand, as well as to design interventions that are context-sensitive and culturally relevant. Our contributions from the

academy are to offer different frameworks to apply for conflict analysis and transformation and concepts to make sense of their experiences toward transformation and sustainable peacebuilding. It is in the field that theory, method, and practice meet.

Reciprocity: The Dialectics of Learning in the Field

Peacebuilding professionals benefit from learning how theory and methods manifest in the field, since that is where their practice is nourished by local context-based peace and conflict knowledge. "One thing is to arrive to the field as a tourist, and a very different one is to arrive as a peace scholar,"[1] claimed Mateo, a student from our 2022 cohort. Indeed, educating peace professionals requires setting the conditions to facilitate a shift in perspective. It requires approaching the field with a different attitude and mindset than how one would approach it for tourism or business purposes. Our approach to experiential learning invites students to arrive at the field with a sense of responsibility; they are invited to use keen observations to contribute to the work of grassroots peacebuilders. This is one way in which a PAR mindset is useful as the people the students interact with in the field receive mutual benefits from their experience together.

Cultivating keen observation is central to our approach, as only by being able to identify areas that are ripe for transformation can peacebuilding professionals learn about and contribute to processes of peacebuilding in conflict areas. This is one way in which students are able to apply their conflict-analysis tools to perceive what they are witnessing from multiple perspectives. It is an opportunity for them to add value to the local peacebuilders because they are able to shed light on a situation from an external perspective that those local to the potential transformation might not be aware of.

Another conceptual tool that is central to our approach is *listening power*. This refers to "the ability to construct shared understandings of subject matter, as in violent conflicts, between local actors and researchers to draw conclusions in a sometimes, dialectical process" (Fisher-Yoshida and Lopez 2021, 36). Equipped with this, students listen to the testimonies of people in the field and are guided to dig deeper into people's experiences and knowledge of the conflict at hand dialectically. Grassroots peacebuilders and students come to conclusions, make academic contributions, and what's most important, identify potential interventions. Building *listening power* as part of a peacebuilding skillset enriches peace professionals' capacity to identify ripeness for transformation, create rapport with community members, learn the intimate experiences of the effects of violence, and design strategies to intervene doing no harm.

To engage rigorously with the concept of *listening power*, we modeled our approach on the pillars of Participatory Action Research (PAR). One of the definitions of PAR is that "it aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including choosing to participate), and generate internal commitment to the results of their inquiry" (Argyris and Schon 1989). But PAR is as broad as the world of engaged researchers, and thus Chevalier and Buckles use the "big tent" metaphor to explain what PAR is. They claim: "Tricksters and mythic characters prone to disobey rules and conventional behavior […] come in all shapes and forms, male and female, human and animal; They can mix attitudes from different species and transform

themselves to further subvert life as we know it […] PAR is a similar phenomenon" (Chevalier and Buckles 2019, 11).

We define PAR as "being participatory in that relevant voices are heard, action oriented so that whatever is created and decided is implemented, and research-based in that there is rigor in how data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and used" (Lopez and Fisher-Yoshida 2024, 59).

Guided by PAR, our approach instills a profound sense of commitment and co-responsibility to peacebuilding students. They leave the course committed to work in participatory ways and with a sense of responsibility to contribute to the work of grassroots peacebuilders, to academia, and to transforming the conditions that harm people.

Another important aspect of PAR is the effect that it has on the inner dynamics of grassroots peacebuilders. They take their work to be an object of research and also a vehicle for social transformation, and thus the knowledge and methodologies they acquire while engaging in PAR is integrated into their peacebuilding initiatives. One of the groups of community leaders that has engaged in PAR with us has been shown to benefit from our collaborative work. They utilize the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), a method we taught to them, to constantly reframe their own story as peacebuilders, to reorganize their yearly planning, and to reorient their work with the community. In workshops they offer to the children and youth of their neighborhood, they teach some of the findings we've gathered in the field, as well as utilize the theoretical and methodological tools we used in our collaborative research projects to deliver more effective workshops. In addition, we have seen how grassroots peacebuilders gain more legitimacy, especially in academic and government spaces, by being able to demonstrate collaborative work with researchers from institutions such as Columbia University.

How Students Engage with the Concepts

Another one of our students, Conrad, told us that being able to learn a method in the classroom and then teach it to others in the field was gratifying and insightful for his own practice. He said: "some of the most meaningful learning came from the fieldwork experiences and direct stakeholder engagement […] to learn CMM[2] as a student then teach it back as an instructor in settings like *Colombo Americano* and *Fundacion Juanfe* in Medellin still resonates with me."[3]

Learning can—perhaps should—be chaotic at times. There is learning in wrestling with the challenges that sometimes the field poses. For our Columbia University students, one of the challenges is the language. Conrad tells us: "I thought not being fluent in Spanish would have been a weakness, but the little Spanish I did know humbled me and I formed some wonderful connections with my classmates from Los Andes University simply by trying to speak Spanish with them." At the end, what seemed chaotic and challenging, was transformed into being humbling and connecting.

Valeria, one of our students from Universidad de Los Andes, also reflected on the limitations of language. She said: "it was difficult talking about what moves me in English, talking about grief while experiencing my own grief," but then she adds, "more than a difficulty, it was an invitation to think about learning […] to always contextualize the position of others and understand that ideas that may

seem distant from you, and that may feel unacceptable, are also the result of the other person's context."

Here Valeria alludes to the importance of context even to thinking about her own positionality in the field and with her classmates. Valeria also claims that "thinking about peacebuilding is thinking about the construction of a process […] it seems that the glue that cements such processes take[s] the physical form of joy, dance, and music […] it also pushes me to recognizing myself outside the stories I carry to make sense of life, to come closer to others in the egalitarian territory of the senses."

Our work in the field is a long iterative process, with successes and failures. The end goals are as important as the process itself. To achieve the end goals we believe the process is key, and this is integrated into our experiential learning approach. We tell students: *protect the process!* Valeria's reflection demonstrates this point.

Laura, another of our students, reflects on the collective and participatory nature of our experiential learning approach. She said: "change doesn't necessarily start by implementing new public policies, but by standing firm in collective goals and purposes that guide actions towards a better future for all." Then she explains this in more detail: "one of the learnings that stood out the most for me is the importance of resilience in bottom-up peacebuilding […] despite the multiple challenges that many community leaders face when they are creating and sustaining peacebuilding initiatives, such as painting 'living portraits' when the armed actors who committed the crimes are still active, or the lack of support they receive from government institutions, they still manage to persevere in their efforts to create a new reality apart from violence."

With these reflections from our students, we reaffirm our commitment to experiential learning and to engaging with Participatory Action Research approaches to guide our research, practice, and educating peace professionals.

Educação Popular: *Conscientização*

A central figure to our approach is the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian sociologist and educator, and architect of *popular education*.[4] Freire's work, especially in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2018), has been insightful to our experimental learning approach and has guided our research and practice. Freire's fundamental teaching is that education is to be liberating and that the more fully we enter into the social reality of those who experience the effects of violent oppression, "he or she can better transform it" (Freire 2018, 38).

Experiential learning is to be guided by Freire's concept of *conscientização*. He claims that to have truly liberating education, people should be conscious about their "fear of freedom" (Freire 2018, 35). *Conscientização* has to do with learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.[5] It is to become conscious of the sociological contradictions that sustain oppressive conditions.

Indeed, peacebuilding is all about transforming the conditions that produce and reproduce violence and oppression in our societies. To do this, peacebuilding professionals need to be keen in understanding the contradictions of the systems that perpetuate the cycles of violence. We need, according to Freire, to break from our "circles of certainty" and be, on the one hand, critical about the conditions that perpetuate violence, and on the other, creative in establishing new conditions (Freire 2018, 38). The status quo that keeps us trapped in the "circles of certainty"—the same that keep us away from transforming our societies for good—must be put into question (Freire 2018, 36).

Doubt about our own assumptions, curiosity for the unknown and the stories of others, collective responsibility, trust in the processes, generosity, and indeed, *conscientização*, are the pillars that sustain our approach to experimental learning and liberating education for peace professionals and scholar-practitioners. Theory/knowledge that does not correspond to a social reality and that cannot be made practical, is theory/knowledge unable to transform the world.

In the field of peacebuilding there is a lot of work in the making (theoretical and practical), though most is crafted in offices of non-governmental organizations and university libraries. The field—where conflicts occur and are lived—are taken as mere receptors of the theory that is crafted in the comfort of offices and cafes.

Contributing to a Field

The impetus animating our work comes from our experience in the field; this led us to identify the lacunae existing in peacebuilding education. Our work contributes to ongoing educational tendencies that seek to prepare peacebuilding professionals in more rigorous ways and to ongoing conversations on research, practice, and education in the field of peacebuilding.

Here are some other initiatives taking place that our work responds to and seeks to contribute towards. "The United States Institute of Peace offers a course on peacebuilding that is described as an overview of the peacebuilding field and introduces the skills needed to succeed in it. Guided through an exploration of USIP's 30+ year experience engaging with local partners in conflict zones around the world, learners are exposed to a set of key theories, skills and approaches to building peace and to real-world examples that exemplify the complex challenges of peacebuilding" (USIP n.d.).

The components of the course are as follows:

- Explain global trends in conflict over time and how these trends have given rise to the field of peacebuilding.
- Define many of the key factors that impact peacebuilding: in particular, peace, conflict, violence, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, resilience, and reconciliation.
- Understand how conflict sensitivity and inclusion, as well as local solutions for local conflicts, are pillars of peacebuilding.
- Outline key peacebuilding priorities, actors, and approaches.

The School of Professional Studies at New York University (NYU), offers a course titled, "Peacemaking and Peacebuilding." This course is described as an exploration of "contemporary methods for peacemaking and peacebuilding as responses to real and pertinent internal and external conflicts, relating to internal and international peacebuilding measures. There will be an emphasis not only on addressing conflict through high-level diplomacy—often thought of as "peacemaking"—but also with an emphasis on what local communities increasingly understand as "peacebuilding" in the form of restorative justice and long-term peacebuilding efforts which consists of, but are not limited to, a set of highly interdependent social, religious, and political approaches to interpersonal, international conflict" (New York University n.d.). Also, the Jackson School of Global Affairs at Yale University constructed a peacebuilding initiative that offers a variety of courses on the theme of peace for undergraduate and graduate students. The objective of the peacebuilding initiative at Yale is to:

> develop peace-based course offerings at the graduate and undergraduate levels. These courses will address political, economic, ethical, cultural, and biosocial dimensions of peacebuilding. Students will learn theoretical and methodological tools to think critically about what drives conflict and sustainable peace, learning from concrete examples of peacebuilding in regions of Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, and gaining in-depth understanding of issues related to human security, health and human rights, social inclusion and post-conflict justice. Students will apply their analysis to a range of peace-related research, practice, and policy. This knowledge will inform their coursework at Yale, summer internships, and careers in peacebuilding, public policy, global affairs, global health, and humanitarian work. (Yale University n.d.)

Similar to these courses, ours is guided by current theory and method on conflict and peace studies. The value added of our work is that we take such theories and methods to the field, with our students, and assess their applicability or lack thereof. In doing this, we have designed an experiential learning approach to peacebuilding that brings attention to the importance of doing fieldwork with students, as well as on the potential benefits that constructing knowledge in participatory ways can have in the fields of peacebuilding and conflict studies, through a collaborative process.

Format of the Class: The Peacebuilding Practicum

The Peacebuilding Practicum course takes place on multiple platforms: in the field, at universities, and online. The main part of the course is centered in the field for ten days, preceded by an orientation session online a few weeks before leaving. It is followed with assignments due after the students return.

We've been conducting this course for several years and partnering with another university in Colombia. It started with us being focused in Medellin and partnering with EAFIT University. We added an initial time in Bogota before heading to Medellin, and have been partnering with Universidad de Los Andes. Therefore, students from a university in Colombia and Columbia University come together to participate in the course.

At the orientation session, we provide an overview and address the assignments, especially those that need to be completed before departure, such as the readings. We want the students to have a firm conceptual understanding of the field and how to frame the learning they will have when coming together in the classroom and in the field with local peacebuilders. We review the agenda and cover logistics so students can be appropriately prepared. The ten days in the field are filled to the brim with activities and local travel, from morning until evening, including several evenings that have sessions as well. There isn't much time available for students to begin their preparations because they need to rest, enjoy the sights beyond the classroom, and engage in conversations with new colleagues they are meeting. In other words, they hit the ground running and need to be prepared scholastically, emotionally, and physically fit for the lively pace of the course.

One of the most amazing observations made by the instructors is how the students blend together. The students from within each of the participating schools may not know each other before the course and they certainly don't know students from the other university. The first day of class they sit in different clusters. As the days progress they intermingle so well with each other, you forget to which university they belong. This joining together is replicated once they meet with others in the field. Deep friendships are forged and we know that many stay in contact with one another long after the course is completed.

In the Field

Students from Columbia University travel to Bogota on their own and arrive by Sunday, so they will be prepared to begin learning together with their classmates at Universidad de Los Andes on Monday morning. The first four days are spent in Bogota with lectures and presentations in the mornings and fieldwork excursions in the afternoons. Being in Bogota provides opportunities for us to invite guest speakers to present on their work in journalism, or as a member of the Truth Commission, or as holders of political office. It provides an added depth of perspective from the inside out and a chance for students to interact with major players on the ground whom they would not have had access to otherwise.

The fourth evening we fly to Medellin for the more intensive fieldwork portion of the course. Both groups offer different perspectives and skills to the understanding of the Colombian conflict and the peacebuilding efforts. The students from Los Andes have more intensive and personal takes on the conflict over the years, with family members having been more directly affected in certain cases. The Columbia University students are more familiar with the concepts and tools we cover, and together they have informed conversations. Here is where we witness natural leadership qualities emerging. There is a lot of group work with an assortment of tasks. Different members of the group come forward at different times because someone may be familiar with the method for systems mapping, while another might be good in visual representation, and a third familiar with the historical context. We have been working with different community groups, art-based groups, and those youth-led, in Medellin for more than ten years. That is why we are able to have deep access into what is happening on the ground in the peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and human rights arenas, especially in Medellin. Members of these groups present to our students and the students have chances to interact

and apply the concepts and skills they are learning to these real-life scenarios. They share their learning with the youth community leaders.

Some of the groups we've been working with address conflict transformation through the arts. For example, *Casa Kolacho* was formed after a famous rapper, "Kolacho," was killed by the paramilitary shortly after a large-scale violent attack called Operation Orion in comuna 13, Medellin. They work with youth to provide alternatives to violence through the four lines of hip-hop. Another group in the same comuna 13, Son Bata, work with Afro-Colombian youth in conflict transformation and identity conflict, also using hip-hop and more recently, technology.

Escuela Popular de Arte (EPA),[6] focuses on implementing skills and discipline in youth through teaching the schools and forms of graffiti. They have a chance to express themselves creatively and change their narratives about themselves, from the violence and seemingly limited opportunities around them, to what they can accomplish with a sense of agency. *Las Pirañas* is a women's graffiti crew who want to "feminize the streets." Graffiti is a male-dominated art form and painting in the streets can be rough for women. This group is also studying feminism in their graduate courses and they recently made a documentary about their work to reach a wider audience.

Learning takes place on multiple levels, including informally through perspective sharing. Together, the students and these groups of youth-led peacebuilders forge deep understanding and mutual respect by what they each contribute. The youth leaders in these organizations benefit from the conflict analysis the students offer and the respect they are given by students deeply admiring what they have been able to accomplish. The students have a chance to see conflict transformation at work and it brings to life the theories, tools, and skills they are learning in the classroom.

Demonstrating Learning

There are opportunities throughout the course for students, individually or in groups, to reflect on site visits, readings and other resources, presentations by invited speakers, and applications of class content. The culminating activity is a group conflict analysis with intervention recommendations for one of the organizations we met during our time in Bogota, Medellin, or a third city we selected for the trip that year. Students apply a variety of concepts and tools we covered in class, some required, such as creating a conflict map that includes the identification of actors, structures, and dynamics that both contribute to the conflict, reduce the likelihood it will emerge, or lessen its intensity.

In addition, students are asked to apply a dynamical systems approach because of the complexity of the prolonged "*violencia*" of 60+ years. In this activity they use a shared platform called MIRO, so that all group members have access to the map at the same time. As part of this mapping, group members will identify the different elements in the system, such as cultural norms, historical events, actors, institutions, policies, that have both led to prolonging or escalating the violence, as well as reducing the violence. They identify feedback loops that connect the elements and reveal the dynamic patterns. The goal is to understand how the energy moves around the system to identify openings for intervention that will transform violent dynamics to produce spaces of peace and coexistence.

They are asked to be creative and utilize whatever else is relevant to them and the perspective they are taking. Ideally, they gain insights from the group at the center of the case study because they have been working in the field to transform their local conflicts. The mapping and analysis the students engage in is a way to elevate and enhance the work of these groups to be more effective in achieving sustainable peace.

The groups present for 20-30 minutes and all members must present one part of the case study. The audience is their fellow classmates and some people they have met in the field. Following the presentations, we engage in a lively discussion where we all have a chance to reflect more deeply on the cases. As a follow-up, we send the presentation and accompanying materials to the group at the center of the case study for their continued learning. This follows the PAR approach we amplify, and the organizations in the case study participate in and benefit from this analysis and recommendations.

Along the years, we have noticed some patterns in the proposals/recommendations presented by students. Sustainability, both in time and in financial resources, of the peacebuilding initiatives is a general concern for students. Most tend to recommend ways to create more sustainable initiatives by appealing to funding opportunities outside of the city's participatory budgeting and for increased social entrepreneurship opportunities. In terms of sustaining initiatives over time, they tend to propose revised organizational structures based on the methods learned in class, such as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). In their conflict maps, they tend to identify similar issues across the years. Matters such as "invisible borders"[7] within communities affected by violence, lack of participation in the decision-making process in public policy, and a general disconnection between public policy and community needs, are mostly present in students' analysis of the cases.

Commentary

Several students have acknowledged how privileged they felt by meeting people in the field. One quote, "Thank you so much for giving us access to your network," reflects this appreciation. We were moved by these sentiments and at the same time didn't think otherwise in planning the course. All parties benefit from the interactions. It did give us pause to acknowledge that indeed, we have built special relationships over the years and the value of continuing to show up should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8yg89WYy7E.

2. CMM is the Coordinated Management of Meaning, a practical communication theory developed by W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen in the 1970s.

3. Taken from informal conversations with students after the course, between September and October 2024.

4. Popular education is a concept based on critical theory and class to refer to a type of education that seeks to transform societies. Developed by Paulo Freire.

5. In Freire (2028), see chapter 3—translator's note.

6. The name is this organization is influenced by Paulo Freire's concept of *popular education.* See footnote 3.

7. Invisible borders are imaginary divisions created by gangs to geographically distribute their territorial control. These borders condition the way inhabitants of the neighborhoods move from one place to another.

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