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# Conflict Resolution and Transformative Pedagogy

## A Grounded Theory Research Project on Learning in Higher Education

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*This article reports on original research designed to track the impact on student learning and development of fundamental pedagogical changes—from tradition to critical pedagogy—in undergraduate conflict resolution teaching in the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. Using grounded theory methodology, the authors researched the transformative learning potential of the pedagogy. They found broad support for the pedagogy on student learning and development grounds in relation to the praxeological challenges of peacebuilding and conflict resolution work many of their students will expect to do after graduation. Out of the data emerged four clusters of learning experience that support transformative learning theory, particularly the role of disruption in learning and the importance of critical reflection, but that also, in a preliminary way, suggest some gaps in our current levels of understanding of transformative learning as praxis.*

*Keywords:* conflict; conflict resolution; conflict resolution training; critical pedagogy; peace education; pedagogy; transformation; transformative learning

This article reports on a research project undertaken at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The research, which was conducted between January and June 2006, tracked the impact on students of a fundamental revision of our first-year course, Introduction to Conflict Resolution. This article focuses on one of the key aims of the research project: to understand our students' experiences of learning within our revised methodology and, in particular, the possibilities of transformative learning through the course. From this, what could we learn about transformation in conflict resolution (CR) as theory and practice?

One of our aspirations for developing an alternative pedagogy for CR was to bring our experience and understanding of the underlying transformative aspects of CR theory and practice into some congruence with our teaching of it and,

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therefore, to create the possibility of transformative learning. In short, we wanted to find an approach to teaching and learning that could provoke or enable new ways of seeing and, possibly, being for our students. In the event, it was the students' encounter with alternative methods of teaching—our use of cooperative learning methods and a reflective portfolio as the assessment—that provided a catalyst for transformative learning. This approach proved to be a significant challenge to students' prior assumptions, causing negative reactions amongst the cohort but also prompting critical reflection and some profound changes in understanding. Through analyzing students' experiences of the course, including their own analyses of their learning contained in our data sources, we found support for some of the core assumptions in transformative learning theory, namely the role of disruptive events/ideas and critical reflection in learning. At the same time, the experience has complicated our understanding of what transformative learning might mean in practice. If we think of our educational activities in terms of distance from and engagement with the practices of CR, traditional education where "knowledge" is delivered through lectures and "banked" by students is most distant from practice and is teaching *about* a subject. The ethos that underpins peace studies in many programs—ours included—pushed education "about" peace to education "for" peace. The goal of education "for" peace is graduates who go on to work in the peace field, presumably adding to the strength of "alternatives to violence" voices around the world. Their actual experience of education, however, is still mainly through the accumulation of intellectual subject knowledge. Our interest in undertaking this research was in creating opportunities for students to experience a learning environment where we engaged directly with peace praxis, that is, education *as* peace (doing it, and, at the same time, learning/reflecting about it) and that this environment would create greater opportunities for students to experience transformative learning. Our experiences suggest some limits to the possibilities of education *as* peace in higher education and, therefore, limits for transformative learning in this setting. This article, therefore, offers some commentary on the theory of transformative learning, as well as on transformative learning as praxis.

The first part of the article discusses our attempt to create an alternative pedagogy for CR centered on the concept of *transformation*. It then briefly outlines the research methodology and the theoretical assumptions that have informed our teaching and the research process. The article then turns to the findings from the research project, reporting first on the clusters of learning experiences identified in the data, and then analyzing the factors that enabled learning and steps toward transformation. The final sections discuss the implications of the research in the light of theories of transformative learning and critical pedagogy.

## Teaching for Transformation

CR is concerned with understanding the causes and dynamics of conflict and applying this understanding in processes for peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Within the field, however, there are different perspectives on the aims, ethos, and practices of CR. In recent years, the concept of *transformation* has become important in debates within/over CR and signals a concern to recover and extend the emancipatory potential of theory and practice (Bloomfield, Fischer, & Schmelzle, 2006; Fischer & Ropers, 2003; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005). This idea emerged from critiques of mainstream approaches to peacemaking that are often concerned with quick “solutions” to conflicts, rather than more fundamental transformations of underlying causes. From a transformation perspective, CR is less about the application of techniques or models for managing conflict, than a search for processes that can make possible myriad transformations of self, self-in-relationships, self-in-society, as well as transformations in the structural realm. Much of this emphasis on transformation in CR has emerged in practices and writing about peacebuilding and can be traced through the work of Curle (1971, 1990), Galtung (1975, 1976), Lederach (1995, 1997), R. Väyrynen (1991), Rupesinghe (1995), Jeong (1999), and Jabri (1996), amongst others, and now can be seen in the shifts in language in U.N. policy documents related to peacebuilding and war recovery.<sup>2</sup> The turn toward transformation in peacebuilding and CR is motivated, almost universally, by the recognition of the shortcomings of present CR practices for creating sustainable peace, justice, and reconciliation in societies recovering from war. In addition, critique of CR practice and theorizing is growing (cf. Fetherston, 2000; Paris, 1997, 2004; Richmond, 2005; T. Väyrynen, 2001)

The concept of *transformation* within CR increasingly echoes quite strongly the concept of *transformation* as it is employed in adult learning theory by Mezirow (1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The critical turn in CR to an extent shares the same intellectual heritage, influenced as it is by the critical social theory of Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Habermas, 1987; Held, 1980; Outhwaite, 1996). Interest in transformative learning emerges from dissatisfaction with learning conceived as a technical, instrumental enterprise, and from a concern to realize the emancipatory potential of education. Transformation entails the critical questioning of frameworks of meaning and social discourse, making problematic existing ways of seeing and doing. Through changes in understanding and perspective, through the reframing of “problems,” personal and social transformations become possible.

From our perspective as CR educators, the concept of *transformation* has a useful double resonance, referring to processes of learning (or unlearning) linked to change at different levels and impelling us toward a different idea of what CR education should be, that is, one that can meet the challenges posed to CR practice. In other words, transformative CR can only be realized if practitioners themselves have the knowledge, skills, and—crucially—the disposition to engage in a form of praxis consistent with a transformative ethos. This means being able to think in complex, critical, self-reflexive ways while organizing, engaging, participating, and communicating in peacebuilding/CR work, often in very demanding and complex situations. Shor (1996) provided this succinct explanation of praxis as “action relating theory to practice, in a specific context that challenges limiting situations” (p. 3). For CR praxis, the constructive and constructing aspects of praxis are vital,

that is, the complexities of constructive and constructing relationships in social spaces and the speed of and necessity to work within real-time events.

It became clear to us that there was a lack of fit between the aims and ethos of CR as an academic subject and as practice, and the way it was being taught in our department. Teaching was itself quite traditional in form and method and reflected the traditional paradigm within CR; that is, there was an emphasis on mainstream theories, models, and techniques. This is not to say that teaching did not allow for critical engagement; however, the spaces for transformative, emancipatory learning were limited. The potential for students to become knowing or skilled in reflective, even reflexive, ways was not being realized. It was increasingly troubling that we were graduating students from our program who would only be reflective practitioners by accident or prior experience. This situation, we felt, called for some deep changes. In response, we wanted to put in place a pedagogy that would create an education *as* transformative CR and would therefore contain the possibility of transformative learning.

An engagement with Johnson and Johnson's (1999, 2004) work on cooperative learning led us to develop a modified, critical pedagogy for CR—one that would be doable (just) given the constraints of our institutional space, the size of our classes, and the experience/expectations of our students, whilst meeting our aspirations for a more congruent form of teaching. Cooperative learning, not surprisingly, privileges cooperation as a means of producing more effective and enduring learning in students. Research demonstrates that intense and effective cooperation in learning groups leads to students who make greater efforts to achieve learning, have more positive interpersonal relationships, and have better psychological health (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, pp. 192-193). Its uniqueness, and relevance to us, is a method of simultaneous teaching/learning; that is, students engage with a content area at the same time as learning/practicing prosocial skills during group work exercises. Because groups function as microcosms in which real conflicts and negotiations would be played out, students have to employ core CR skills to make their learning groups effective. It is significant to note that students would be asked to deliberately and consistently reflect on group processes and skills, connect them to the course content and then to wider, deeper issues underpinning CR theory and practices via critical reflection. This emphasis on critical reflection, in class and in the assessment (a reflective portfolio), would provide the possibility for change leading not only to fundamental shifts in perspectives but also to the development of praxis.

We report below our analysis of students' experiences of this new curriculum for CR. We analyzed this experience through the lens of transformative learning, in an attempt to understand what makes transformation possible in a higher an educational setting, what this implies for our effort to create an education for transformative CR, and beyond that, what is implied for CR praxis. Before turning to our main analysis, we comment briefly on the research methods used in the project and then on the theoretical assumptions that informed our teaching and the research process.

## Research Method

The research utilized a grounded theory methodology, mainly following the methodological formats set out in the works of Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2005, 2006) and Clarke (2003, 2005), eschewing the more positivistic and traditional forms of grounded theory found in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). That is, we tried to allow our analysis to emerge from the data we collected, to reflect the picture of students' experiences captured therein. Having said this, we also acknowledge that our engagement in the research process was driven by a set of intellectual interests and normative commitments, not least our interest in transformative learning. Our interpretations, therefore, are never entirely free of theoretical and other assumptions.

We triangulated, or perhaps more accurately "circulated," our data, drawing from quantitative and qualitative sources: (a) marks, attendance, and demographic characteristics; (b) pre- and postanonymized surveys of the cohort (82 registered students on the course); (c) pre- and postinterviews of a randomly selected group of 16 from the cohort; (d) analysis of student portfolios (71); and (e) our own field-notes, memos, meeting records, e-mails of our observations and experiences of the class, interactions with students, and so on.

One point is worth highlighting about the data. We came to realize that the portfolios provided the richest source of information about students' experiences of learning on the course. With 71 portfolios, we had access to the experiences of almost the whole class, and because students were essentially reflecting on their learning during the course, their writings were directly relevant to the research project. We could see, in students' own analyses of their learning, their responses to cooperative learning, their skills development, and the possibilities for and obstacles to transformation. Detailed analyses of the other sources of data still served to illuminate, strengthen, and deepen our understandings; however, the portfolios became the most significant data source. Yet this focus on the portfolios raised a number of methodological issues, in particular the possibility that students might be "faking it" and "writing what we wanted to hear" because the portfolios were being assessed. We argue that, though some portfolios were more or less obviously performed and though it is difficult, ultimately, to identify fakery, the majority of students appeared to write quite honestly, to use the portfolio space to record their reactions and assessments of the course, and to reflect on their own learning experience. Given that students seemed confident enough to be highly critical of the course, in feedback sessions and in the portfolios, we found that the data contained in the portfolios were reliable enough, and triangulation supports our claim that students were not routinely writing what we wanted to hear in a way that would skew the data. Finally, this conclusion is strongly supported by our experiences of teaching the follow-on, second-year course with the same cohort, which deepened student engagement with the new pedagogy through a reflective portfolio.

## Transformative Learning

We need to consider briefly where we situated ourselves with respect to the literature on transformative education and critical pedagogy. In other words, prior to the start of this process, what were our assumptions about learning and teaching? What guided the changes we introduced in our teaching? And what did we expect of the learning process we entered into with our students?

1. Transformative learning involves profound shifts in our understanding of knowledge, the world, and ourselves.

As we discuss below, our understanding of what is transformative in learning has shifted through the process of teaching and research. At the beginning, though, a concept of *transformation* existed as an aspiration, something we believed might be possible. This idea came from various sources, including the aforementioned debates about transformation within CR and peace studies. We also drew on the critical pedagogy tradition inspired by Paulo Freire and elaborated by Giroux (2001), hooks (1994), McLaren and Leonard (1993), Shor (1996), and others. Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientization* is an important touchstone here, expressing the idea that education should not simply encourage people into an accommodation with the world, particularly one that is oppressive or disempowering. Instead, education should encourage a form of critical literacy, or the capacity to understand and question the ideas, assumptions, and discourses that inform individual and collective experiences, the common sense of society. Such a notion of education foregrounds its political dimensions; it is no longer "neutral" but oriented towards the achievement of social justice and personal liberation. It brings students into an engagement not only with knowledge but also with the forces that construct knowledge and lend it social value, legitimacy, and power. In fundamental ways, education becomes a task of unmasking or deconstructing power in its different configurations. Here, we follow Foucault (1971, 1977, 1978), Rabinow (1991), and Faubion (1994) who revised the limits of conventional understandings of the nature of power as repression or domination, by uncovering a diffuse positive power. Foucault (1977) contends that this diffuse power operates as an array of discourses, specialized knowledges, techniques, and institutions—the "micro-physics of power" that together function not to prohibit or repress but to exhort and to normalize modes of thought and action. Power is exercised through the deployment of "discourses of truth," which exert control not by establishing laws or rules but through fixing norms. By understanding power in this way, through the constitution and operation of discourse, we can seize transformative possibilities by "separat[ing] out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer, being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (Rabinow, 1991, p. 46)

More recently, we came to the work of Mezirow (1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) and to the literature on transformative learning. Mezirow draws on the critical theory tradition and Habermas, in particular, but locates his framework specifically in the field of adult education. Echoing Freire, Mezirow saw in

learning the possibility of emancipation, of achieving a critical distance from the ideas that are our familiar frameworks of understanding. Mezirow drew further inspiration from social constructionist thinking and from critical social theory, mainly Habermas.

Taylor (1998) usefully and succinctly summarizes the key aspects of Mezirow's transformative learning theory,

Three common themes of Mezirow's theory are the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation. It is the learner's experience that is the starting point and the subject matter of transformative learning. Experience is seen as socially constructed, so that it can be deconstructed and acted on. It is experience that provides the grist for critical reflection. (pp. 8-9)

Mezirow argued that we can make meaning through reflection, thereby becoming more conscious and less dependent on received notions and entrenched thinking habits (Mezirow, 1991). As a result of this clarification of meanings, we can extend our agency and take more conscious part in the construction of our own realities. Following Boyd (1991), Mezirow noted that this process often involves two processes, an "objective re-framing" whereby we begin to understand the wider issue of power, socialization, and the history involved in how we come to be, and a "subjective re-framing" that involves the personal difficulties of working through and confronting change (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, pp. 22-23).

2. Reflection is key to the achievement of transformation.

As noted above, reflection is central to a process of better self-understanding and learning that might be transformative. As Mezirow and Associates (2000) wrote, "we transform frames of reference—our own and those of others—by becoming critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of their context" (p. 19). It is through reflection that we can recognize problems, as well as the ways that problems are framed, and take steps to solve them. Reflection then becomes an important skill to teach in its own right. Applying this thinking to our new CR pedagogy, we wanted, at one level, to help students become critically reflective practitioners, capable of recognizing what they are doing in practice, learning from mistakes, and deploying skills with what Schön terms *artistry* (Schön, 1987). At another level, reflective assessment brings the student's self into the learning process; it becomes a focus of reflection in its own right. Students and lecturers then become engaged in a process of critically reflecting on the teaching/learning itself. This, in turn, becomes an important part of the learning potential of the course—as a space to learn about CR, peacebuilding, and transformation, but to simultaneously experience and practice it through critical reflection. The pedagogy in itself then becomes potentially transformative.

3. Transformation is a process precipitated by experience(s) or information that disrupt current understanding.

Critical reflection rarely happens for its own sake. It is normally prompted by a need or an experience that makes critical reflection necessary. Thus, we follow Mezirow (1991) and Brookfield (1995, 2005) in understanding the crucial role of encounters with new ideas or new experiences that, because they create a sense of dissonance or discomfort, may then initiate a process of learning—an attempt to resolve the conflict between established patterns of thought, practice, or premise and the information and experience that presents a challenging alternative.

4. Teaching for transformation involves creating spaces for critical engagement and dialogue.

Following the previous point, if the course was to make transformative learning possible, it needed to bring students into an encounter with knowledge, ideas, and practices that would be new and challenging, and sufficient to prompt critical reflection. By using cooperative learning techniques, we were able to expose students to different, often competing perspectives on aspects of CR, but also to encounter the diversity of opinion within the class through groupwork. This exposure to diversity would (and did), in itself, disrupt students' sense of what they knew, confronting them with the challenge to articulate, defend, or revise their knowledge in dialogue with peers and with the teaching team.

At a theoretical level, we were informed by Habermas' work on communicative action and discourse ethics. According to Habermas (1987), *communicative action* is a means of intersubjective dialogue between a community of actors that enables them to reconstruct common understandings of their lifeworld and, therefore, renew the shared basis for culture, social integration, and socialization that underlie a mutual existence (pp. 343-344). In such a way, communicative action makes possible the reproduction of the lifeworld. This normative content of the lifeworld "has to be acquired and justified from the rational potential inherent in everyday practice, if it is not to remain arbitrary" (p. 341).

Creating spaces where intersubjectively produced mutual understandings become possible enables the reconstruction of communication networks that are free of manipulation, coercion, and so on, and a renewal of the threefold basis for the reproduction of the lifeworld: cultural traditions, social solidarity, and personality (the maintenance of "identity in the shifting contexts of interaction," Habermas, 1987, p. 343). Through the "unforced force of a better insight" (p. 305), the knowledge encompassed in the lifeworld through which the ability for mutual understanding arises is "submitted to an ongoing test across its entire breadth" (p. 321). It is clear that an ideal space for communicative action cannot exist; however, that does not lessen the validity of opening space for the necessarily incomplete and imperfect possibility of reconstructing the basis for meaningful and peaceful social existence. In this way, communicative action can be the basis for a critical pedagogy.

5. The concept of transformative learning resonates with an education for conflict transformation.

As described earlier, we noted a resonance between the concepts of *transformation* in theories of learning and in the CR literature. We noted critiques of the field that suggest that CR can be conservative, coopted, or manipulated as a tool for the maintenance of the status quo. CR is frequently locked into a problem-solving framework that takes for granted particular conceptions of the world and devises solutions accordingly. As a result, outcomes from problem-solving approaches may serve to sustain the present social order making, as Cox (1991) put it, "relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble" (p. 129).<sup>3</sup> From a more critical, transformative perspective, CR should also be concerned with problematizing any given framework of institutions and social relations, as part of the search for more lasting or meaningful outcomes (pp. 129-130). This underscored for us the importance of teaching CR through a pedagogy that invites, even exhorts, transformative learning and instills a critical disposition towards knowledge, self, and the world (Barnett, 1997).

## Was Learning Transformative?

The course was run over a 12-week semester, with one 3-hr session each week. We provided a hybrid teaching environment, meaning we retained a more traditional lecture during the first hour and, in the second and third hour, rolled out our new pedagogy. Assessment consisted of an essay plus a portfolio made up of a reflective statement, weekly reflective diaries, and other demonstrations of learning. The purpose of the reflective statement was to provide an overview and self-assessment of learning and development that was evidenced in appended class materials, weekly diaries, annotations, referenced bibliography, and so on.

The class was organized around ongoing, four-person base groups, which undertook a range of activities including simulations, debates, projects, and presentations. We employed most frequently the jigsaw procedure where each member of the base group received a piece of the learning puzzle and was then dependent on the other three to understand the whole picture (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, pp. 35-36). Our focus as lecturers in the teaching space was to create and facilitate supported spaces for students to engage with their experiences of the methodology and content, and to model as far as it was possible, communicative action. From our research, we identified three basic ways students participated in the class: (a) engagement, (b) benign resistance, and (c) negative resistance.

Throughout the course, there were people who were engaged with the methodology and learning process. This did not mean they necessarily liked or enjoyed the experiences or that they did not experience frustration and struggle—alongside support, learning, and achievement. Indeed, our experience suggested that transformation required frustration and struggle. Engagement, therefore, indicated a student's own struggle to learn within or alongside the course, rather than in opposition to the methodology, content, or teaching team. It did not preclude critical commentary on the course; however, this was mainly of a constructive kind aiming for deeper understanding of self-in-the-process.

Benign resistance describes those students who took a detached attitude toward the course. They did not actively or loudly contest the methodology but nevertheless resisted in more or less subtle ways—through partial or apathetic participation in groupwork, for example, or through quiet skepticism towards the class. Identification of this group came mostly from personal contact with the students, although some of these issues were discussed in portfolios.

Negative resistance was, not surprisingly, the most difficult response to manage in the context of the course and worthy of a paper in itself. This resistance to the pedagogy was persistently negative, largely un-self-aware, and externally focused. Some of this resistance had toxic or destructive elements that were palpable in class, sometimes expressed directly to lecturers, but more often student to student in groupwork. We label this *toxic* because it had a kind of infective impact that deenergized and disabled base groups where it was not energetically and persistently countered. Each kind of student involvement—engagement, benign and negative resistance—combined with differing learning trajectories over time to create numerous and diverse microcosms of larger group processes of escalation/deescalation of conflict and CR mirroring the content of the course.

Underlying all of these experiences was the fact that the course was new, different, unexpected, and as a result, challenging. Two examples from portfolios are indicative: “conscious reflection was a completely new experience for me and one that I did find challenging” (P70) and, “In the early stages I feel I didn’t learn as much as I could have but learnt a lot about how to deal with new challenging ways of learning”(P32).<sup>4</sup>

Forms of participation were not static, however. From about Week 4 onwards, there were significant shifts in understanding and engagement with the course for many students. At this point we saw a reduction in the amount of resistance, benign and negative, the beginnings of more constructive forms of engagement, and spaces opening up for transformative learning. For example, we saw changes in the whole class—facilitated discussions held at the end of most sessions. Not only was participation during these discussions broader (more and different people taking part) but also the way that students were voicing their opinions was more open and inclusive with students frequently in dialogue with each other, rather than simply addressing the teaching team. There appeared to be a greater willingness to make space for diversity and complexity, and to acknowledge the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings. In the end, our analysis of the portfolios and other data showed that some students had reflected seriously on their prior assumptions, achieving in some cases quite profound changes in understanding.

Based on our experience of the course we focused our analysis on the journeys taken by students through the course, the different trajectories and destinations reached, and the reasons for those differences. It seems that most students experienced the course as a disruptive and/or challenging experience at some level, and that many students underwent a process of change in their understanding and attitude. For example, an analysis of attitudes to reflection showed movement from little understanding to greater understanding to greater valuing of reflection as a learning method and skill. Of the 71 coded portfolios, 59 talked in some codable

way about reflection. Of these, 15 were coded as negative and 44 were either coded as positive or mixed—on a negative to positive trajectory. We found no experiences of positive to negative. We then ran a query on the 15 negative codes for reflection with ‘not getting it’ and found five matches. Of these, four just did not seem to get reflection at all, whereas one did clearly move but through a very difficult and quite negatively focused process.

Overall, only a handful of students appeared not to get anything at all out of the class, maintaining, to the end, a negative resistance. On the other end of the spectrum, there were a small handful of students who “got it” quickly and were positively engaged throughout. Similarly, only in a minority of cases did students experience what might be classed as transformative learning—creation of new meanings—subjective and objective, through critical reflection on fundamental assumptions. Even then, these transformations appear to us not as a complete or deep transformation of the self, though there are indications of the beginnings of such processes. Instead, we see this transformative learning as tentative openings to new ways of seeing and being that may be quickly reversed or undone. We discuss this and the implications in the subsequent section.

As we describe below, we can identify four distinctive clusters of experience of our CR pedagogy. Analysis of these clusters reveals the variables that affect student experiences of learning and the factors that enable students to deal constructively with the discomfort, perplexity, and angst caused by the course. It also suggests that our previous understanding of transformative learning requires some modification.

## Clusters of Learning Experiences

### CLUSTER 1: “NOT GETTING IT”

This cluster describes those who revealed a limited understanding of the pedagogy and reflection, as well as an unwillingness to engage in a process of critical examination of their beliefs. Students who we identified as ‘not getting it’ reported frustration, anger, hostility towards the course (and us). Although in all clusters students were engaged in “correcting” what we did “wrong” and advising us on better ways forward, they were strongest and most persistently reported here. Experiences in this cluster tended to be expressed in at least one of the following ways:

1. angry/accusatory: “‘doing time’ (that’s what it felt like) in conflict resolution” (P26);
2. sanitized/strategic: “the depth of learning was a great factor in the authenticity of my reflections; when reflecting on some of the groupwork after the sessions my diary signified real understandings and insightful reflections”(P21, a student who was persistently negative and disengaged from the process in every other forum), “this resulted in an attitude that I could crudely adapt my existing understanding to the new topic by simply compensating for the context without the need for much further study”(P37), and “the reflective diary sheets seemed

nothing more than a weekly task, aimed at making me engage with reflective learning”(P7); and

3. disengaged/denial: “I was so dissatisfied with the process that I was insufficiently motivated to put in the extra effort required”(P10).

### **CLUSTER 2: TRANSITIONAL/CHALLENGES**

We understand this cluster as a space where students began to come to grips with the course material and methodology. What emerged from the data was a sense that students began to understand what was expected in relation to participation and assessment and to engage with the class at least in a strategic sense, that is, to pass the course. They began to articulate for themselves where they fit into the course, how they wanted/could engage with it, and enunciated the challenges and blocks to doing that successfully.

### **CLUSTER 3: “GETTING IT”/CHANGE**

We understand change in relation to our students’ experiences as a space arrived at—rather than transitioning through—where new information, understandings, and awareness were gained and skills were employed with more deliberation and reflection. Our data suggest that there is little struggle, greater calm, and, perhaps, relief in this space. It is more about having achieved a certain level of knowledge and understanding that was commensurate with the students’ attainment goals in relation to assessment and other educational experiences and expectations. Students were then involved in integrating the new understandings and further developing and gaining proficiency with CR skills. This represents the typical aim of teaching and learning, in the sense of accumulation, of adding new layers of understanding, and, perhaps, occasioning some reorganization or structuring of that knowing. Crucially, this does not signify encounters with hegemonic discourses/regimes of truth and is, therefore, not the meaning-making based on engagement with premises that Mezirow (1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) and Brookfield (1995, 2005) discuss.

From the transitional/challenges cluster through change, students gradually demonstrate greater self-reflectiveness, with more potential for open questions and a greater sense of responsibility and control over their own learning. The emphasis—or the limit of thinking—was on the specific subject matter presented, on the self in the class space, and the day-to-day issues of getting through a university degree.

Assumptions about learning were challenged, and change occurred, particularly in the following areas: (a) the usefulness of reflection; (b) the usefulness of individual responsibility for learning; (c) the acquisition, practice, and confidence with skills; and (d) the benefits of base groupwork. The majority of students talked about significant changes in at least one and, in most cases, all of these areas. With 61 of 71 portfolios evidencing change—even keeping in mind the potential for “faking it”—this triangulates well with our work in and out of class with students.

What characterizes the limits of this change cluster is that open questioning, knowledge seeking, and skill acquisition all took place within the given discourses and frameworks of knowing. In other words, hegemonic/paradigmatic assumptions were not engaged—or, if they were, students hedged around them.

#### **CLUSTER 4: TRANSITIONAL/DISRUPTIONS**

It is surprising to note that a *transformation* cluster did not readily emerge from the data, as we had expected. It remains this cluster in our analysis, as a potentiality invoked—an ideal *Transformation*, a fixed and universal category. A handful of students wrote convincingly about their experiences in a way that initially suggested transformative learning. However, on reflection, we decided that the data demanded an alternative category to capture the sense of being close to transformation, but not experiencing transformation in a fuller sense. Rather than wholesale reorganization of fundamental assumptions, we found that our students were recognizing problems in their prior frameworks of understanding and seeing the need for change. Their statements were characterized by a fluidity and greater openness to different possibilities, committed engagement, growing reflexivity (awareness of self/other/discourses), and awareness of contradictions. However, in analyzing the data no clear cluster of transformative experiences emerged; students had clearly moved beyond ‘change’ but had not achieved *Transformation*.

### **Discussion**

Why were some students more able to deal constructively with the discomfort caused by the new teaching method? What enabled movement from not getting it and negative resistance to change and beyond?

#### **BLOCKS TO LEARNING**

Many students resistant to the course, either at the beginning or throughout, communicated their low motivation, apathy, and disinterest with respect to our pedagogy. Most did not understand the point of the groupwork or assessment, were not making connections between the theories and practices, and retained a strong adherence to familiar traditional/individualistic, instrumental/competitive frameworks of learning. Comments such as “my process of learning over the course of my life has always been individualistic and competitive in nature” (P62) were typical. These past experiences and expectations of education were probably the most significant cause of discomfort and resistance in the class. Students expected and wanted knowledge “delivered” by an “expert,” which they could bank and later reproduce in an essay/exam. This produced a hurdle that some did not overcome.

Students also hampered themselves by not reading/engaging/understanding the course material. A number of portfolios made the point that significant learning only happened at the end of the class when, through the assessment process, they were forced to do some reading and reflecting and that this process led them

to realize what the course had been about and what they might have gotten out of it.

### **FACTORS FACILITATING CHANGE**

An obvious but important factor in explaining change was the process of familiarity and understanding that developed through the semester. Because students were engaged week to week in similar activities, with the same people in their base groups, they became more familiar with the process, and with each other. Both forms of familiarity helped to reduce anxiety associated with a new experience and enabled students to become more open to the ideas behind the teaching method, as well as to the course content. As students gained understanding of the content area of CR, they were also better able to make connections between the theory and their own engagement in practice.

Also important were developments in skills learning; many students reported improvements in skills such as communication, listening, mediation, negotiation, as well as more academic skills related to the analysis and synthesis of texts and communication of ideas. In the data analysis, 61 of the 71 portfolios were codable for interactive skills, meaning that the student had developed his or her interactive skills further in some way. These excerpts provide typical examples:

I began to see, however, the idea and aims behind what we were doing and that in itself made the process easier. I was able to engage with my base group better as we got to know one another and we felt more confident to share our experiences more easily. (P7)

During the course I felt that I changed the way I interacted with the group. . . . I felt more encouraged to communicate ideas when I began to know the group members better. In the base group I was more prepared to share ideas, cooperate in group tasks and negotiate topics with group members. (P12)

The base groups themselves played an important role in supporting learning. This is substantiated in the portfolios (with codes of peer relationships, positive interdependence, and promotive interaction) and the surveys. In the surveys, 24 of 35 students reported shifts in perception, the majority noting that they were prompted by group processes (14), which was then followed by self questioning/thinking (10).

Where students reported having a harder time getting comfortable with the demands of the class, this was due, in part, to difficult base group relationships—mainly around one or more members of the group being unmotivated or apathetic toward the course (“toxicity” was an important force here). Alternatively, where people reported positive base-group experiences, adjustment seemed quicker and easier, and “getting it” more likely. This positive experience did not preclude conflict or difficulties; however, rather, groups who managed to navigate through those issues found their understanding, communications, and relationships improved as a result. Even those who reported wholly negative group experiences learned something, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Despite this I think that failure of my group has been a valuable experience because it has made me think about my role and reaction to conflict. As a result I have evaluated my position and have identified stumbling blocks in my own process of conflict resolution and can now take steps to address. The whole course experience for me has been very personnal [sic] as I have gained deeper understanding of myself. (P35)

Groups also reported learning and development through empowerment. This was reported by groups who changed the form or process of learning set up externally by us, to something that worked better in that specific group. This indicated shifts in responsibility for learning from emphasis on the teaching team and what we provided to what the groups and individuals did with what we provided in the space. Coinciding with internalized responsibility for learning was an increased use of the reflective diaries to think about the learning process, the class environment, and group dynamics.

The most significant factor in explaining movement in learning, particularly from the more fluid transitional spaces towards change, was reflection. However, reflection itself had different characteristics; there was, unsurprisingly, a relationship between the depth and quality of reflection, and the nature and extent of change. At a certain point, reflection seemed to take root for many students, and a more considered and integrated self-awareness and skills use (understanding) was noticeable. However, consistent with models of reflective learning, we could distinguish between reflections that were critical, situated in relation to broader frameworks of meaning, and those that remained within a single, narrow frame of reference. In other words, when students engaged fully with the theoretical literature and drew on this in reflecting on their own experiences, they were more likely to develop new questions about and insights into their learning.

## The Limits of Transformation

As suggested already, most students who moved into the change cluster reached a learning plateau. For some, there was novelty in reaching this space, particularly in relation to the pedagogy. Students reported feeling that certain aspects of their lives had changed, that their perspectives had shifted in important ways. More commonly, students talked about the skills they felt they had developed (and evidenced this development), as illustrated in the following:

The first time I felt things “click” so to speak was in Week 5 . . . it was a great feeling to feel what had been spoken about in the lecture before make total sense during the group discussion. (P46)

It left me questioning my own performance. I know that I largely remained competitive within the group discussions and must still hold that this is the best frame for my learning. However, I am now questioning this and wonder if I am in fact limiting my learning. I do see that within the base groups I shared the work and enjoy this style of learning much more than I did in the beginning. (P41)

These quotes indicate that students achieved quite important changes in their understanding, revealing some skill in self-reflection and a willingness to explore new possibilities of thinking and acting. However, these do not suggest that students had transformative experiences, in that they are reporting the beginnings of change, rather than the integration of new, transformed understandings.

This plateau undoubtedly posed a challenge for some students as it invoked disciplinary limits and provoked a kind of simultaneous unwillingness/inability to go further (Foucault, 1977). Making use of Foucault's work, Shor (1996) usefully talked about the way in which students' prior socialization engenders a kind of self-marginalization, a "self-protective negative agency" against the enactment of the "regime of truth" (p. 14). Taylor (1998) discussed the often-overlooked issue of student responsibility in transformative learning, citing research findings suggesting that responsibility is key to the process (pp. 59-60). If students are unwilling to engage—to take responsibility for their learning—transformative learning cannot occur. Boyd and Myers (1988) talked about the importance of discernment in transformative learning, which involves, they argued, receptivity, recognition, and grieving. Each of these, unacknowledged, becomes a potential block to transformative processes. They suggested that transformation involves recognition of "old thinking" and, crucially, a grieving for these "old" assumptions and understandings that were previously fundamental to a person's life world and then a moving on. Implied here is a sense of the importance of emotions in transformative processes, that transformative learning is not only or even a "rational—ordered" set of processes but also, significantly, engages nonrational meaning making involving emotion, intuition, disordering, and mess (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 277). Perhaps, not surprisingly, given the academic environment in which they were produced, our portfolios did not contain much evidence for these nonrational experiences, and this was in stark contrast to the emotional roller-coaster of teaching the class week to week. However, academia is, more than anything, a rational and rationalized environment where emotions are only studied (they are not felt, lived through, and certainly not revealed). Perhaps, more than anything, this explains the plateau of change that most students were unable to shift from and it may be the most significant challenge we face in employing our pedagogy successfully in a higher education environment—that is, how to create space for non- or extrarational experiences, as well as legitimized, rational ones.

Moving off that plateau involved at least reading the course-based literature and, beyond that, some awareness of or engagement with critical metatheoretical aspects of that literature. Those students whose reflections made use of concepts and ideas drawn from the course literature were more likely to experience shifts in their understandings, and in a few cases quite deep shifts. As obvious as this seems, many students, despite reading and referencing (or claiming to at least), were not able to apply insights gained from this reading to their own experience and use this to develop a more analytic viewpoint on their learning. In the few cases where students immersed themselves in critical theoretical literature, this enabled a more profound questioning.

Second, in moving off the plateau, students were using experiences in the class and related experiences outside class as material for reflexive engagement with CR, themselves, and with wider institutional, social, political awareness; in other words, they were making important connections. Third, in all the portfolio cases that had elements of transitional/disruptive experiences (between six and eight portfolios), there was evidence of significant struggle. Struggle can be seen in the experiences of students within each cluster; however, for other clusters it did not seem necessary, whereas moving off that learning plateau into transitional/disruptions seemed to necessitate considerable struggle. These learning experiences were incomplete, fragmentary, indeterminate, messy encounters, rather than total or complete experiences, or necessarily ongoing. Fourth, and finally, common to all these factors is a reflective attitude and a willingness to confront the feelings aroused by new knowledge, new experience, or struggle and to work through them reflectively.

Despite these indicators of some deep shifts in perspective and meaning-making, the portfolios show the complexity and difficulty of disentangling core aspects of self—personality, identity, and so on—from deeply held/socialized assumptions. Students seemed to maintain/hold onto a sense of core self that remains relatively stable in this process (although not unaffected). Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* is relevant here. He argued that from birth we learn the particularities of our close social environment, the interpersonal, cultural, social, and political practices relevant for our social world.<sup>5</sup> *Habitus*, therefore,

provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. It “orients” their actions and inclinations without strictly determining them. It gives them a “feel for the game,” a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not. (p. 164)

In a similar vein to Foucault, Bourdieu argued that *habitus* sets limits of knowing because it “inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable.” (p. 77). Rather than becoming conscious of these deep assumptions and then shifting them, the process, for our students, appeared more like the hard work of peeling back *habitus*, as in peeling an onion, and yet eventually leaving space for the self to see more thoroughly the effects of what is taken-for-granted. This “seeing” had spillover effects; it was translated to questioning other knowing about the world. The following excerpts illustrate this.

But something I've begun to question now is even just the concept of things being “right or wrong.” Is there a “truth” to be attained which then becomes the “right answer”? It's strange that I have quite fluid ideas about education and knowledge in general, but have a tendency to think that many things have “an answer.” I think I need to think about this further and probably let go of the idea of “an ultimate truth.” (P64)

I don't see myself “inside” those positions, organisations, newspapers, articles, books; I don't see myself in lecture or in a lecture on International Aid Agencies

for example. In other words I often feel alienated from the material which is part of the academic institution, the academics within the institution, the “movers and shakers” politicians, those in development, higher level conflict resolution etc. Before the CR class I may have put that experience down to purely a personal lack of capacity to connect, to relate, to be a part of, and as a result experiencing myself as less than I some way. Now, I would be more inclined to explore what else could be going on in the environment which has led me to see myself so far outside of these realities, positions, relationships. I may also be more inclined to listen to those experiences that tell me I am uncomfortable or “don’t fit.” (P14)

These statements do not do justice to the full complexity, depth of engagement, and struggle by some students in the class to grasp the multiple meanings of education *as* peace. Our observations of and interactions with students indicated a growing awareness of their own *habitus*, as well as considerable struggles with the portfolios and groupwork. As one student said,

This work also does not convey the real understanding of myself that I have gained. I get the feeling that this is the start of a major structural shift in my thinking—to a perspective on reflection I didn’t even know about days ago . . . this journey has been perhaps the biggest challenge of my life. (P33)

Finally, in considering the limits of transformation, we came upon the problem of the concept of *transformation* as the key to our pedagogy and as the new goal of CR. Employing transformation enacts a hierarchical valuing—the idea that only transformative learning in the fullest sense is valuable or significant. Although we were conscious of this and sought to avoid it, it becomes difficult in practice. On the one hand, we would argue that a person’s learning and development needs to be contextualized—to be understood in relation to where they started from. For example, one of our students nearly dropped out of the course and the University, never spoke in class, and felt incapable in comparison to fellow students:

I just wanted to escape and even considered choosing another degree course. I just felt like a fish out of water, I didn’t belong . . . at any time during this mess I could have asked for help. . . . I didn’t do it because I didn’t want to appear incapable of studying at degree level. (P27)

Yet towards the end of her portfolio she sums up her experiences quite differently, “I spent twelve weeks interacting and sharing my views with a few different people and for me this is amazing.” Did she achieve transformative learning? No, but she did experience empowerment and change and, viewed on a continuum, her journey is remarkable and important. In general, as this example suggests, we found that significant learning, sometimes life-altering and empowering learning, took place for students within each of the clusters identified above with the exception of the ‘not getting it’ cluster. Do these experiences constitute transformation? From the perspective of transformative learning theory, we argue “no.” The student did not exhibit critical reflexivity engaged with analysis of power,

discourse, and hegemony and, therefore, developed little recognition of or fundamental shift in premises. The nontransformative struggles and learning journeys, even the intense resistances of some of our students, run the danger of being overlooked in our emphasis on a pedagogy that creates spaces for transformations. When transformation becomes closely associated with higher order thinking—critical reflection—or with the problematic, hybrid values of liberal peace implicit in CR work (Richmond, 2005), it becomes difficult to avoid the disciplining and reifying effects of this hierarchy, particularly when it is reinforced by assessment practices that reward, or place higher value on, critical reflection. The implications of what is invoked in this new, transformative truth require further analysis and consideration elsewhere. For our present purpose, we must satisfy ourselves with some preliminary final thoughts.

## Conclusion

Pedagogically, this new course was, on the whole, successful. In the three learning areas—reflection, skills, and content—students achieved learning results far above our previous teaching experience with this course using more traditional methods, and students themselves reported and demonstrated a range of learning outcomes that coincided with our original pedagogical goals. We are convinced by the results of our analysis of the data (and further supported in our observations of the follow-on course) that the teaching and learning is more congruent, relevant, and ethical as a preparation for CR praxis in the field. There are, of course, aspects of our pedagogy and research not described here, and the emphasis on this article has been the transformative aspects of our work.<sup>6</sup> Taking the wide view briefly though, this project has engaged in important cross-fertilization; of particular importance has been the applicability of cooperative learning theory/method and transformative learning theory for CR but also, in important ways, a rediscovery of our peace studies roots, through reengagement with critical pedagogy in practice. This combination, we argue, has led to a significant breakthrough in education *as* CR leading to engagement with CR and peacebuilding *as* praxis. In this way, we suggest, we have begun to close the gap identified by Schön (1987) between “the idea of rigorous professional knowledge,” which he argued is based on a kind of instrumental rationality, and on the other hand “awareness of indeterminate, swampy zones of practice” that are beyond the capacities of technically derived solutions, yet which contain the most pressing human problems (p. 3).

Our research mapped four clusters, almost phases, of learning, approaching but not achieving, transformation as delineated by Mezirow (1991). The most interesting insights that emerged from our coding and analysis of the data in relation to transformative learning were on the themes of resistance, the learning plateau, and the messiness, contradiction, and partiality of transitional/disruptions (or nascent transformations). The relevance of further understanding of toxic negativity in resistance is crucial not just for our teaching but also for thinking through the processes of peacebuilding that underpin CR. The learning plateau provides us

with multiple challenges, not least of which is the emergence of an invoked transformation into our learning spaces.

However, these challenges go well beyond the classroom. Our students who exhibited little interest in developing awareness, reflection, and insight may become practitioners, and this in itself raises issues. However, what of the complex conflict environments we see around the globe? If our students find transformative learning and critical pedagogy so challenging, how can we expect to bring about transformations in complex, violent, social environments? How, for example, does toxic negativity, induced, perhaps, through traumatic experiences, infect peacemaking efforts? In challenging our students and ourselves to face these issues in the relative safety of our class/learning space, we aim to generate greater potential for facing and overcoming these challenges in CR processes.

Finally, as was noted above, a transformation cluster did not emerge from the data as we had expected. We could, if we were inclined, seek to claim that our students experienced “transformations” that were messy and imperfect, extrapolate from them and compare them to an emerging consensus focused on uncovering [T]ransformation—the reality/ideal that exists “out there,” in the wider literature (capital “T” in *transformation* signifies a singular and universal truth that is discoverable, a lower case “t” signifies pluralities, contingencies, and incompleteness in knowing).

What we suggest instead parallels concerns about the impossible goal of [T]ransformation in CR, the striving for which is incongruent/incoherent with our critical pedagogy, research methodology, and with CR practices more widely.<sup>7</sup> We find ourselves faced with, and not for the first time, the oft-cited conundrum of the post-modern turn, that acting in the world requires some foundations. In other words, invoking [T]ransformation reinstates hegemony as it deconstructs it. Instead, what we found in our research, while we were searching for [T]ransformative experiences, were [t]ransformations. Students’ experiences were partial, incomplete, messy, complex, sometimes incongruent encounters with various aspects of the course/wider social space. Rather than wholesale reorganization of fundamental assumptions or overthrow of internalized hegemonies, we found our students described their experiences as shifts in some attitudes, fluidity or greater openness in some assumptions and perspectives, greater engagement and empowerment, greater/more aware skill use, and greater awareness (of self/other/discourses). And, more important, these were experienced over time, incrementally, and at different levels of intensity. What distinguishes these experiences as [t]ransformative is their tentative/partial situatedness at the limits of discursive knowing/being. In a preliminary way, our research suggests that students seem to maintain/hold a sense of core self that was relatively stable in this process, bringing us back to Bourdieu’s *habitus*. [T]ransformations then, as our students experienced them, seemed best understood as the messy objective/subjective, personal/social bringing into awareness of *habitus* around that core self.

What wider implications for CR work come out of our research? Two points stand out to us: first, CR teaching, training, learning, and preparation needs to be built on pedagogical congruence, largely absent, at present, in higher education

teaching of CR; and second, transformation in teaching and praxis needs to be employed through a finely balanced ongoing awareness and interaction at the boundaries of discursive knowings where complexities are most intense so to avoid “doing harm” but also “doing good.”

## Notes

1. The Department of Peace Studies is one of the largest academic centres for the study of peace in the world, with a student body of 350 to 400, at undergraduate and postgraduate (MA and PhD) levels. Conflict resolution as a subject has been part of the taught programs since the Department’s inception in 1974 and from 2000 has been offered as a separate degree in the BA and MA programmes.

2. The development of the idea of peacebuilding and problems associated with implementation in U.N. documents can be traced through, for example, the following UN documents: Boutros Boutros Ghali’s, *An Agenda For Peace*, 1992, Kofi Annan’s *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, 1995, *Responsibility to Protect*, 2001, *In Larger Freedom*, 2005 (building on the Millennium Development Goals), the Brahimi report, 2000, and the recent creation of the Peacebuilding Commission (<http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding/docs.htm>). See <http://www.un.org>, for access to these and other relevant documents.

3. Cox here follows the distinction between traditional and critical theory originally set out by Horkheimer. See Horkheimer (1937/1972).

4. Throughout this article, quotes from portfolios are referenced as P# for Portfolio Number.

5. Habitus or these “orienting” processes do not necessarily produce social practices that are constructive, rational, ethical, just, or humane. Rather, as Bourdieu (1977) argued, “every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness . . . out of which arise the sense of limits, commonly called the sense of reality” (p. 164). Habitus, then, mediates the individual’s interactions with the social world and are so taken for granted and “commonsense” that they operate as “truth” outside consciousness (Thompson, in Bourdieu, 1991, p. 13).

6. In relation to the wider context of the course itself, the curriculum changes have been rolled out over 3 years. A follow-on core second-year course with similar pedagogy ran from September to December 2006, and an optional third-year (final) course is in the planning stages to run September to December 2007, and pedagogically will emphasize negotiated curriculum and assessment (cf. Shor, 1996).

7. Of particular interest in relation to methodology is John Law’s (2004) point that “if this is an awful mess . . . then would something less messy make a mess of describing it?” and the implications thereof (p. 1).

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