

INNOVATIVE INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN POST-WAR ENVIRONMENTS: CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Introduction

The relatively recent conclusion of armed violence in Northern Ireland following the Belfast Agreement of 1998 and the establishment of agreed political structures on a bi-communal partnership basis represents an important example of attempted peaceful transformation of conflict. This stage of the conflict had lasted some 30 years, saw over 4000 deaths, represented a sustained uprising against the British State and was one of the most intractable global conflict zones. In addition to the political violence and counter-violence, deep-rooted antagonisms existed (and were often exacerbated) between the two communities - most frequently classified as Roman Catholic and Protestant (or as Gaelic/Irish and British or a number of other descriptors). The cessation of armed struggle has not necessarily produced inter-communal reconciliation and acceptance however. The two indigenous communities remain bitterly divided over issues of national identity, cultural allegiance and aspirations for the future. This population is now almost evenly divided between catholic and protestant and is seeking to move forward while at the same time confronting the issues of shared identity and past histories which divide them so strongly.

A key starting point for analysis of issues around cultural difference, social inclusion and educational provision is the nature and pace of change in modern Irish society. The nature and extent of this change is producing a social configuration unlike anything that has preceded it. The transition from rural to urban – and other impacts of globalization – is occurring in a context of continuing post-colonial adjustment in a politically divided society. In the Irish experience, deep currents of violence and instability have paralleled processes of social change. The violence ranges from the more or less forced migration of hundreds of thousands from their place of birth in the Republic since independence to the more overt, cyclic violent instability in the North. Common concerns around underdevelopment and ownership of wealth have been voiced in the context of rampant sectarianism, discrimination and significant disparities in access to resources.

These unresolved conflicts of Irish societies and identities are the background to a deeper understanding of social inequality than can be assumed from a more traditionally standardized version of social change, divorced from context and history. With conflict over resources and identity as a starting point rather than result, we can develop a more accurate picture of the challenges and opportunities for educational provision. This analysis helps us to locate issues around exclusion and inclusion in the proper framework of ownership and control. In short, change in Ireland has been an unfolding and thorough restructuring of all social, cultural, personal and ethnic relationships and understandings. At almost every level of Irish social experience in the late twentieth century there has occurred a profound and all-embracing re-examination of what it means to be Irish.

This means that traditional certainties no longer apply. The question of identity is at the core of much Irish social re-examination at present. In this sense, Ireland is not unique. The profound upheavals at European and global levels of the past century have often been intimately connected with identity and/or the assertion of identity against assumed foes. The very project of the European Union has at its core an assumption of the need for Europe to assert its place in the world, although against what (or for what) remains unstated.

The reality is that European identities are as fragmented as Irish ones - and with as much baggage for its own citizens as for those countless millions who have been its colonial subjects.

Contexts

Since the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921, a particular issue has been the status and identity of the State that emerged in the six north-eastern counties that remained in the United Kingdom (with its own regional government in Belfast). The State of Northern Ireland was rejected from the outset by Irish nationalism and republicanism. Its validity was not accepted or recognized by a significant minority of its own citizens. It was to endure prolonged spells of political instability and communal violence in every decade thereafter. The most recent conflict began with a struggle for Civil Rights in 1968 and soon escalated into a violent conflict between republican combatants and the British State which lasted until the Belfast Agreement of 1998 (with several ceasefires in between). Loyalist counter-violence contributed to escalating spirals of terror and death.

The depiction of Ireland as a homogeneous and uniform cultural polity is a recent and inaccurate one. The trauma of the last thirty years has been in equal measure linked to social change, urbanization, inequality and cultural identities as much as it has been to movement for political unification or resistance to unification. For our purposes, the key point is that Ireland has never been a uniform or agreed socio-political entity. The nature of Irish society has been a fragmented, divided and polyglot one. In its very fibres, Ireland has been a laboratory of diversity. Its cultural mosaic has encompassed layers of identity not to be expected in a remote offshore island. Its discontinuities and divisions have however been the source of extraordinary creativity and interplay, where no one culture (Celtic, Gaelic, Danish, Norman French, English, Scottish, Flemish, Jewish or Huguenot) has had a monopoly of Irishness.

The impact of colonialism and planned settlement led to divisions and grievance within the population. Sectarian differences were often carefully fostered to the exclusion of common action on socio-economic issues. The fact remains that modern Irish societies, and Northern Ireland in particular, display worrying levels of uneven development and disturbing levels of documented inequality, poverty and discrimination. Environmental degradation, homelessness, two-tier social service provision, absence of planning, asset stripping of public services, discriminatory sectarianism and blind reliance on ever-increasing consumption patterns are but some of the indices of current shared social malaise.

At another level is the sustained debate around concepts such as social justice, human rights, public morality and equitable distribution of wealth. The end of formal military action has highlighted the need to tackle sectarianism and communal strife in new ways. The need for a response that is connected to the real experiences of existing communities and their needs is at the heart of this paper. The need for educational and training provision that is innovative and dynamic is very different from perspectives that assume Irish society is a stereotypical transition from rural to urban, peasant to modern, backward to progressive. Ending conflict and then transforming it into a learning paradigm that sustains peace is at the core of the project described here.

Membership of the European Union has had a profound effect on the sensibility of Irish social institutions in post-conflict contexts. Additionally, issues around transparency, accountability and democratic deficits (shared however with most Member States) have placed an emphasis on communities to re-assert the meaning and importance of a dynamic democracy. At another level, the European Union, through its specific funds and Community Initiative programmes, has allowed the creation of community-to-community linkages across the Union where much learning and exchange has occurred. At a time when immigration,

citizenship, interculturalism, tolerance of ethnic minorities have all become critical issues for the European project, lessons from conflict transformation and learning in Northern Ireland become important.

This exposure to external ideas, coupled to the need to provide for a growing population with expectations and a sense of entitlement, has transformed Northern Ireland into a questioning society. To this must be added the need to explore both historical roots of current conflict as well as the understanding of identity, values and culture across the Irish experience to transform deep-rooted conflict into forms of acceptance, tolerance and mutual endeavour.

Innovative curriculum – divided society

This provides a starting point for understanding the challenges and opportunities in approaching the issue of educational provision within the context of recent and sustained conflict. No conflict is a new one in Ireland - more properly it may be seen as a new manifestation of problems that have existed for a very long time. What is new and innovative, is that Irish educators and community actors must now address issues from which they have been largely absent as original contributors for many decades.

The derivative and imported nature of much Irish education has been a concern of note for many decades. Irish schooling has tended to model itself on and compete with external systems, largely British. This has tended to deprive Irish social discourse of authentic indigenous voices addressing local concerns, albeit from a perspective of international best practice. Particularly in community spheres like disability, gerontology, health services planning, gender studies, housing provision, spatial planning, transport and cultural diversity the first instinct has often been to reach for imported models, both of analysis and of practice.

It takes time to develop indigenous voices that respond to indigenous needs but yet have international resonance and validity. It takes time and resources to develop capacity – and often even a terminology - which speaks to the immediate and local. If this is done well it can and will enter the marketplace of original ideas. Otherwise there is a danger that models and discourse will endlessly be but a copy of a copy.

Conflicts of Interests emerged as a course and educational program that would address the needs of ex-combatants and their communities by addressing issues of conflict resolution and transformation. The acceptance of the “other” and the validity of the other’s perspective is a pre-requisite for embedding peace in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, achieving this in an atmosphere of profound mutual mistrust, hostility and bitter memories of wrongs and injustice is far from easy. The course is a development sponsored by *Expac*, an agency representing the needs of republican ex-prisoners. It secured part-finance from the European Union’s *Programme for Peace and Reconciliation* (the only EU initiative specifically targeted at Ireland) and the Irish Government under the National Development Plan. *Expac* set itself a target under the funding offer from the *Programme for Peace and Reconciliation* to develop and deliver a number of courses in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Course structure and methodology

Conflicts of Interest is a workshop-based series of seminars. The aim is to enable participants to reach a more sympathetic understanding of all those affected by armed conflict. Given the history of violence in Ireland, the course focuses largely on the period of the more recent conflict (“the troubles” from 1968 to 1998). It also examines similar ethnic conflicts in other parts of Europe. The *Conflicts of Interest* programme is a conflict transformation package utilizing speakers, DVD footage and facilitated workshops combined with structured conflict resolution training.

The aim of the program and course is to enable participants to achieve a rounded picture of conflict and how it may be peacefully resolved. It focuses on their own experiences and learning. It engages them in setting contexts whereby conflict and dispute can be transformed into sustainable peace. It aims to examine identity and inter-group conflict by examining origins and causes.

The objective of the programme is not to proselytize or justify any particular viewpoint. It offers participating learners an opportunity to hear a range of interpretations and to learn from them. On the understanding that there is rarely one truth in terms of human relations and societal interaction, this course sets itself the aim of illustrating the contending positions and opinions that were honestly held by different sections of society (and the State) throughout the past century in Northern Ireland.

It is, moreover, important for learner participants to place Northern Ireland in a wider international context. While it has its own specific history of conflict inducing circumstances, *Conflicts of Interest* seeks to persuade that Northern Ireland is not a unique aberration in history but can be contextualized within a European framework. The entrenched ethnic and religious identities of many in a divided society can be safely examined from wider European perspectives. Taking a lead from thinking that inspired the détente between the European powers post World War II, *Conflicts of Interest* takes the view that conflicts, generally speaking, have their origins within material factors. Conflicts, therefore, can be analyzed more dispassionately and this often offers an insight to a potential solution.

Each module has its own set of key aims and objectives relevant to the topic of the module. These include:

- Gaining understanding of the historic legacies of conflict
- Being able to explore the key components of conflict transformation
- Being able to appreciate the key elements in restoring dialogue and mutual acceptance
- Being able to define the elements in creating trust and conflict avoidance.

A key objective is to enable participating learners gain an understanding of the origins of concepts around universal human rights and develop an appreciation of the key issues underlying rights and justice frameworks. The course looks at the key components of conflict in specific community contexts and allows participants to appreciate the key elements of conflicting issues around understanding of rights. Participants are encouraged to learn how they can bring these lessons back into their own communities and, more importantly, share them with communities with who they have historically been in conflict. The course is designed to be interactive and founded on principles of acceptance, tolerance, non-judgment and trust. The pedagogic methodology allows external expert inputs, multimedia presentations and structured group work to both examine conflict, shared histories and methods of transformation and agreement. The key learning components are:

1. Origins of conflict and the potential for distorted perceptions
2. The course of conflict and its impact
 - Armed conflict. Just War. State monopoly on coercion
 - Human rights/human wrongs. Prison experience.
 - Killing and dying. Human dimensions to conflict.
 - Sectarianism: reprisal or primordial? No first strike
 - Justice, community and the State
3. Post-conflict situations - reconciliation

- Truth recovery: reconciliation or recrimination?

The course involves a number of different inputs including:

- Speakers from a range of viewpoints - including former combatants, the bereaved, academics, civil servants and politicians.
- DVD presentations originally produced that include film of seminal events, interviews with a range of protagonists, music and cultural imagery.
- Facilitated workshops where the participants are encouraged to discuss the material they have watched, to comment on what they have heard and to elaborate on the module theme.
- Conflict resolution training that allows participants an opportunity to acquire the basic, generic principles and skills relating to the peaceful management of conflict and intercultural dialogue.
- Web and e-mail based support for learners.
- A review of different European conflict zones: World War II and its aftermath (leading to the formation of the European Union); conflict in the Balkans (examining the break-up of a forced or contested union); conflict on the Iberian peninsula (focus on two models of autonomy, Basque and Catalan).

Outcomes and directions

The *Conflicts of Interest* program is designed to allow those most affected by violence to understand the roots of violence, to understand their role and experiences and to chart ways to transform the experience through guided learning and discussion. To date it has attracted considerable interest from loyalist communities and has been delivered in Belfast, Donegal, Bangor and Armagh. Using all its own networks and contacts, Expac has been able to offer the course to a wide and diverse number of groups and individuals both North and South of the border. A pleasing uptake on the course has been from within the working class loyalist community in Belfast and Bangor who were among the first to commit to the programme.

In a general sense, this programme has allowed people in marginalized and often impoverished areas to meet with and hear the views of others from different communities and identities. The program has also assisted those in marginalized areas gain the confidence to articulate and place their opinions, views and needs before a wider audience. For those immersed in violence and the rejection of alien cultures and identity the course has enabled tentative steps towards community bridge-building and joint action. Participants have been enabled to focus on what they have in common.

The pedagogic model has been designed to facilitate those who have been excluded from formal educational participation for reasons of social deprivation, conflict or imprisonment. It attempts to provide a safe space where learners can reflect on their own experiences and communities in an atmosphere lacking in threat or condemnation. It has enabled former enemies to confront what lay at the heart of dispute – while also focusing on future possibilities. The communities who have embraced this innovative training are themselves being transformed by wider socio-economic transformations. Identities and traditions are perceived to be under threat. This course attempts in its structure, methodology and content to reflect back the value of perceptions and cherished beliefs – while at the same time challenging the need to attack those of others.

The *Conflicts of Interest* learning program is also a bottom up approach that allows participants to be the subjects not objects of study. The framework and methodology employed allows a wide range of further access opportunities and progression routes. Many participants have emerged from often lengthy periods of

imprisonment with strong feelings of pointlessness and betrayal. Their desire to learn and avoid the mistakes of the past is encouraging.

It also means that the learning technologies employed (by the course providers Expac and ULS) must support attitude change and conflict transformation in a context of acceptance and tolerance. The direct encounter between formerly implacably hostile populations is welcome. There is worrying evidence that many young people are still enmeshed in sectarian rivalries and dispute. If this is to be contained it will mean a renewed effort to promote the learning and change that is meaningful in divided societies. It will also mean an emphasis on emerging leadership to show the benefits of structured learning and cultural self-awareness to engage in politics not violence.

The barriers to equal participation in Northern Ireland are plentiful. These barriers stem from prejudice and ignorance. The removal of barriers can eventually be accomplished (at least formally) by legislation and monitoring practice. But the deeper transformation that society demands can be expedited most rapidly by the communities emerging from conflict seizing the opportunities offered by historical analysis and non-violent contact and incorporating them into learning processes. Advanced *training and education* can bring communities into a deeper understanding of the potential offered by equality, diversity and interculturalism.

These learning initiatives encompass:

- Awareness programs
- Joint actions to combat discrimination
- Training supports for equality measures
- Access to further education and development avenues
- Coordination of State and private initiatives

Pro-active conflict transformation education and training is designed to provide a valuable network of community leaders who have:

- Deeper understanding of rights and diversity issues and their relevance for communities
- Understanding of difference, stereotyping and prejudice
- Understanding of historic origins of difference
- Skills to design and develop methods for conflict resolution.

The removal of barriers to engagement will, at the end of the day, be about asserting the primacy of vision. Vision about what an intercultural society means, and about what it is for, can inform the creative process of community learning. It can give a sense of value and direction to the development of standards of tolerance and inclusion.

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