The Practicalities of Good:
Lessons from Teaching Ethics in Peace and Conflict Studies

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Introduction

The field of Peace and Conflict Studies is forthright in its value base: at its core, it values peace as a good.[1] On the whole, there is a preference for what Johan Galtung memorably termed "positive peace"—a peace in which everyone is able to achieve their full potential, and in which there is no systemic, covert or overt oppression, or violence.[2] The explicit value base of positive peace as an absolute moral good makes Peace and Conflict Studies programs a good fit in college and university programs at Anabaptist institutions, because it resonates theologically. Likewise, the prevalent assumption is that we have a duty to pursue this good of positive peace.

Yet, as we know, doing good is a fraught process. There are trade-offs and compromises when values are juxtaposed. There are times when good intentions produce miserable effects, such as when a desire to engage in dialogue between conflicting parties unintentionally reproduces systemic inequalities and contributes to further entrenchment of the conflict.[3] There are difficult ethical questions around restorative justice and the pressures that can be put on victims of crimes to reconcile with offenders. As well, there are questions about society-wide truth and reconciliation commissions that promise amnesty in order to get a more fulsome narrative of 'truth' on record; yet while amnesty processes have frequently helped secure a transfer of power, there continue to be systemic injustices that contribute to long-term social and political problems in countries such as South Africa. These dilemmas suggest that we need to deliberate further in, and on, our pursuit of positive peace.

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[1] See, for example, David P. Barash and Charles P. Webel, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009).

[2] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167- 91.

[3] Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999).

Wrestling with the dilemmas that arose in field practice—working as a peacebuilding technical advisor in a large relief and development organization—spurred me to develop a course on the ethics of peacebuilding. It was a topic I wanted to explore more deeply. Intriguingly, there were no similar courses for me to examine as I worked on my first syllabus. While Peace and Conflict Studies courses include moral content based upon value claims, such as positive peace or principled nonviolence, I could not find one that gave systematic attention to ethics. More frequently, faculty members would draw on one or two readings to discuss the subject.[4] The notable exceptions were topic-specific courses, like Just War (or Just Peacemaking), typically developed by philosophers or theologians and included as part of multi-disciplinary Peace and Conflict Studies offerings.

I name this experience of a lacuna for two reasons. The first reason is to report that I have learned much about teaching ethics in Peace and Conflict Studies through experimentation and periodic failure as well as success, although success tends not to generate as clear a set of lessons in reflective practice. It is these experiences, and reflecting on them in the tradition of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, that have generated much of the argument that follows.[5] The second reason is to identify what appears to be a curious paradox: namely, that thinking about good and the nature of good is an integral part of Peace and Conflict Studies programs, yet the degree to which this is done systematically appears limited and often excludes areas of applied conflict resolution and transformation practice. Perhaps this suggests that religiously-motivated or Kantian duty-based ethics orientations operate widely in the field, and an assumption that as long as we are motivated by good intentions and universally good principles we are being moral. Or perhaps it suggests a fear that thinking about the harms done in and by conflict resolution and peacebuilding plays into critiques of the field. Whatever the reason, it is a paradox worth examining in the future.

In what follows, I explore a pedagogically focused question: What challenges and opportunities arise in teaching ethics in Peace and Conflict

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[4] E.g., James Laue and Gerald Cormick, "The Ethics of Intervention in Community Disputes," in *Ethics of Social Intervention*, ed. Gordon Bermant, Herbert C. Kelman, and Donald P. Warwick (Washington, DC: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1978).

[5] See Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974).

Studies? I examine three areas: open thinking, deep thinking, and engaging the self. In this exploration, I also touch upon the questions of institutions and ways in which the larger social and political context affect the subject matter being taught, and, to a lesser extent, how critical methodologies intersect in the classroom.

Context

The course I created is called "Ethics of Peacebuilding." It is an elective offered to undergraduate students through the University of Waterloo's Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) program, housed at Conrad Grebel University College. Conrad Grebel sits at the intersection of secular and Mennonite education in Canada. Students in my classes may include some Mennonites but by and large reflect the larger student population of the University. I had begun teaching this ethics course earlier, in 2010, to graduate International Peace and Conflict Resolution students in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC. Upon moving back to Canada, I reshaped it for undergraduate students in the Canadian context. I have since taught it four times, three versions of which steadily built upon each other.

The first iteration of the course in this new Canadian undergraduate context was largely jettisoned. I discovered part way through that I had made faulty assumptions regarding the knowledge base of my students, and this meant I had constructed the course poorly. There was one particularly memorable moment when I was setting up class to discuss the ethical challenges of peacebuilding aligned with statebuilding and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. I found myself receiving almost uniformly blank stares from my students. So I paused and asked, "Are you familiar with the term 'counterinsurgency'?" I discovered that of the twenty or so students in the room, the only one who confidently knew the term was an American student who had lived in the Middle East. I was puzzled, as the term was widely used in my previous teaching context, and Canadian troops had engaged in counterinsurgency measures alongside their coalition partners in Afghanistan. In doing more research, I found that the Canadian military documents referring to counterinsurgency were made public only through Wiki-leaks, and that government and media had avoided counterinsurgency language for Canada's extended engagement in Afghanistan despite its

appropriateness.[6] Context had shaped the basic working knowledge of my students in ways that I had not anticipated.

Another important discovery about the context was that my working model of how students engaged each other in discussions also did not transfer across institutions or national borders. I had become used to undergraduate and graduate students who were ready and willing to speak out and to challenge each other right away; students who, if I offered a provocation, would leap into the fray and energetically discuss merits and demerits of ideas. I found my new set of students reluctant to speak strongly, particularly in ways that would challenge each other's ideas or counter a provocation of mine. Ethical deliberation requires careful and open thinking, and I quickly realized that to make ethical engagement work well with PACS undergraduate students in this new context, I needed to enter into the process of ethical discussion and exploration very differently.

Some elements of my pedagogy have remained the same, such as a robust emphasis on active learning, particularly the use of simulations in order to support student learning about applied ethical challenges in peacebuilding.[7] However, my learning objectives have evolved over time, and the content as well as some of the ways I deploy active learning have shifted (e.g., more use of pair or group-share techniques).[8] In the following sections I outline elements of my pedagogy that have developed as a result of teaching ethics in the PACS program at Conrad Grebel and the University of Waterloo.

Open Thinking

Open thinking is critical for ethics. It includes the ability to ask questions, look for additional information to understand a given moral problem, and

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[6] The "Canada First Defense Strategy" issued in 2008 referred to complex international operations rather than counterinsurgency. The final version of the Canadian Counter-insurgency Operations manual, also completed in 2008, was posted on Wiki-leaks August 3, 2009: https://wikileaks.org/wiki/Canadian_Counter-insurgency_Operations_manual,_13_Dec_2008.

[7] Joel Michael, "Where's the Evidence That Active Learning Works?," *Advances in Physiology Education* 30, no. 4 (2006): 159-67.

[8] The PACS 332 Ethics of Peacebuilding syllabus is available at https://uwaterloo.ca/peace-conflict-studies/sites/ca.peace-conflict-studies/files/uploads/files/ethics_of_peacebuilding_-fall_2015.pdf.

examine a problem from multiple perspectives before coming to judgment. In applied peacebuilding, open thinking also necessarily occurs in the midst of doing peace work, when decisions are taken in haste and may require revisiting in order to feed into future, better peace work. I have found students grapple with three main challenges with respect to open thinking in the classroom: dealing with relativism, relying on religious moral authority, and rationalizing decisions after they are made. These challenges reflect common counterfeits for moral thinking, as Anthony Weston, an American philosopher and educator, has noted.[9]

For the majority of my students, the primary constraint on open thinking is a tendency to relativize. The assumption is that everyone's opinions are equally good. It may be that PACS students are particularly prone to this assumption. While it is helpful in many ways for those growing up in a multicultural context, it short-circuits open thinking in ethics, because few or no questions are asked of each other's decision-making. The task for me became one of helping equip students to engage in constructive, creative, and expansive conversations about moral values and ethics rather than to shy away. One element of this enterprise means thinking together as a class about the ways in which moral value engagement occurs in the public domain and is a positive, important part of social engagement—discovering times when relativism doesn't work (e.g., when people make choices as a society and codify values into laws, such as laws on euthanasia). An activity that involves students identifying issues on which they are dogmatic typically proves the point. Another element is working to develop students' linguistic and conceptual base to engage in questioning (discussed below).

A much smaller set of my students are deeply religious—primarily Christian or Muslim, and sometimes from other religious traditions. For these students, religious teachings are at the forefront of their moral thinking, and can sometimes constrain open thinking because the teachings are taken as self-evident. I have used Weston as a conversation partner to help address these issues, as he artfully discusses the limits of religious authority in applied ethics and highlights the necessity for interpretation when trying to

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[9] Anthony Weston, *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 6-15; Anthony Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 29-37.

apply sacred teachings to modern issues.[10] This is helpful for students who have not thought about how their own religious moral teachings connect to social ethics and collective decisions. Weston's work also provides a foil to react against. Canadian students are quick to point out that they do not find religious discourse in the public sphere as common as Weston suggests occurs in the United States. This reaction then gives us another entry point to excavate the tendency towards relativism that students find more in line with their experience in school and daily life in southern Ontario.

A final concern related to open thinking is the tendency of students to stop probing an issue once they have come to an initial decision. Some students, whether because of good training or natural inclination, do continue to ask questions and explore issues deeply, something that produces more sophisticated and carefully reasoned ethical analyses. Others stop after thinking about one or two dimensions of an issue. My challenge was (and is) to help students, including the weaker and less motivated ones, to engage in deeper analysis. This is a challenge not only for students but for peacebuilding practitioners whose ethical thinking is often constrained for similar reasons, such as other demands on their time or uncertainty as to what or how to think about ethics.[11] I found it required me to structure the syllabus to support deep thinking and reflective skills, to which I now turn.

Thinking Deeply

A course on ethics requires asking questions about what constitutes good ends and right means in peace work, as well as considering what this means in applied settings. It necessitates asking questions about the core values of the field—and PACS majors generally choose the field because they like its core values. I have found that asking big questions (e.g., What is good, *really*? What happens when bad occurs because of our good intentions in peace work?) is delicate work that requires finding or creating a space that allows the class to navigate between cynicism ("We can't do any good through peacebuilding") and optimism ("I'm a well-motivated, justice oriented

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[10] Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox*, chapter three "Ethics and Religion," 59-71; and Weston, *A Practical Companion to Ethics,* 23-36.

[11] Reina C. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders: A Practical Guide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

activist and anything I do is good"). Creating this space involves nurturing the energy and hope that students have, but also equipping them to ask and respond to tough questions and difficult challenges, and hearing how others have engaged the same issues.

Pedagogically, this required expanding the part of the course that examines moral values and supports general applied moral reasoning skills, and giving up some peacebuilding-specific content. I used to cover moral values and moral (or ethical) theories in two weeks. I now take six weeks to examine moral values, explore five moral theories, and work on creative problem-solving in applied ethics. This slower pace allows us as a class to unravel different dimensions of, or perspectives on, what constitutes good and right, as well as to practice applying these different ways of thinking on their own terms. We read about a moral theory—consequentialism (particularly utilitarianism), Kantian duty-based ethics, virtue ethics, ethics of care, *Ubuntu* ethics—I provide additional input, and then we use active learning tools to consolidate our understanding of what each moral theory involves when judging good ends or right actions.[12] In teams in a subsequent class, each theory is applied to a peacebuilding-specific scenario in order to reinforce the learning. I have found that examining and applying each theory separately strengthens the ability of students to analyze a problem from a consistent moral perspective, and that this in turn improves their ability to analyze issues deeply. These classroom discussions are lively, and students have responded very positively to this change (if course evaluations are any indication).

Looking at five different moral theories validates the assumption that there are different ways of understanding how good or right is theorized. While this might seem to support students' tendency to relativize, what I find it actually does is provide a language to question different understandings of the good or right. This enriches our classroom discussions. People feel more confident in raising questions and pursuing lines of inquiry that are in conflict, and thus deepen the conversation around "good" and "right."

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[12] For background on Ubuntu ethics, see *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottsville, South Africa: Univ. of KwaZulu-Natal Press; 2009); Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

An example will help to illustrate. Towards the end of the course, I run an exercise where teams apply a specific moral theory perspective to a post-accord peacebuilding scenario. The task is to choose the sequence of activities from a list of options, given a certain amount of funding available (as in life, not all options can be funded). Teams apply one unique assigned moral theory standpoint to the respective situation. Working in groups helps individuals to reason consistently from a single perspective and to pursue that line of reasoning carefully. Each group then reports their chosen sequence of activities. The moral value frameworks inevitably inform the teams' different prioritizations of activities. For instance, consequentialist groups prioritize immediate security and then focus on institution building to benefit the greatest number overall, while Ubuntu and care reasoning groups prioritize local-level community-building responses that engage relationality directly.

The exercise makes manifest the ways moral values affect how we understand what is needed, and shows there are multiple valid considerations in determining what constitutes good or right that must be navigated in peacebuilding. It also means our work to determine a course of action is not yet done, and the disagreement produces tension over values in the classroom (just as in peacebuilding contexts). Rather than settle on one vision or primary moral values perspective, we as a class must think further about how to use the tension to generate a better response in trying to satisfy multiple moral values—if possible. The better response requires deeper reflection on the context in which we are engaging in peacebuilding, creative thinking, understanding which values are held by which stakeholders, and wrestling with whose values are or should be foregrounded in decisions. It is a collective experiential and analytic exercise. I run this exercise to solidify understanding of the moral theories, to apply them to a concrete peacebuilding problem, and to surface (and experience) a very real challenge in peacebuilding work.

Engaging the Self
In *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle contends that we investigate the nature of good not simply for the sake of *knowing* the good but for *becoming* good.[13]

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[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe and Sarah Broadie (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 1103b.

Similarly (although less ambitiously), one of my learning objectives is that by the end of the course students can articulate their own moral value commitments. While I did not originally name this as a learning outcome, it became one when I realized it was integrally related to why I was teaching a course on ethics in PACS and why students were interested in taking it. This dimension, however, requires personal engagement and self-assessment as part of reflective practice.[14]

When I taught this course at the graduate level, engaging the self was easy, as the students were highly committed to a future career, or were mid-way through that career, and were vested in the questions we were exploring. Undergraduates, while also vested in questions around pursuing good, presented a much more diverse array of interests and were earlier in their career journey. This meant they engaged the material more as a sampler platter than a full meal entrée. They were interested in tasting different things that were well-presented, but they were not yet ready to commit to one dish. My challenge was to provide them space to talk about an issue that mattered to them which was related to peacebuilding, broadening what was offered on my sampler platter syllabus while at the same time helping them develop a way of thinking about issues systemically.

In response, I developed what is now my favourite assignment: an "Ethics Blast." It is a formal ethical soapbox, in which each student shares, in a cogent, two-minute speech, an ethics issue of concern to him or her that is related to peacebuilding broadly understood. The presentation is short and allows students to explain a moral problem, talk about why it is important (to them and to us), and identify one action that we can take in response to it. Students also utilize one of the moral theories we cover to help analyze the issue (they choose which theory). The goal of these presentations is to encourage students to think through an ethical issue carefully that matters to them, and to provide an opportunity to share their insights with peers.

This assignment brings a tremendous array of interests into the

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[14] See Sandra I. Cheldelin, January Makamba, and Wallace Warfield, "Reflections on Reflective Practice," in *Research Frontiers in Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (Fairfax, VA: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 2004); Victoria J. Marsick and Alfonso Sauquet, "Learning through Reflection," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton Deutsch and Peter Coleman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

classroom, and allows students to articulate a stand on a particular issue. Afterwards we talk about the issue and our responses as a class, and we get to engage with each other's interests and challenges. In Fall 2015, the issues included the health of banana plantation workers in Panama (challenge: buy organic, fair-trade bananas), the stigma associated with disability (challenge: remove the word 'retarded' from our vocabulary), environmental racism (challenge: travel to an area where multiple First Nations communities live close to hazardous material dumps), and the large volume of waste the average Canadian generates (challenge: generate less). These were just some of the issues students raised, and in response we talked about ourselves—the bananas we eat, the way we consider disability, the waste we produce—and contemplated how to do better. It is a regular, contained exercise in self-reflection, and conversations tend to be most animated when discussing issues with which students have personal experience (e.g., buying bananas). Discussion gets more difficult when we are talking about the Canadian government's action vis-à-vis the conflict in Ukraine or United Nations peacekeepers in Haiti. Yet these issues too provide an opportunity to reflect upon how fully we are connected to events and people in the world.

Another element of self-reflection is addressing the problems of self-justification and the failure to explore an issue openly and deeply (discussed above). This involves what Chris Argyris and Donald Schön term "double loop learning," and includes reflection in action and reflection on action.[15] It involves thinking systematically about how one applies moral values as well as stepping back and assessing which moral values matter and are most appropriate to consider in a given context—developing *phronesis* (moral discernment), to use the Greek term.

The final course assignment is designed to work on these skills of reflection. The last two classes are dedicated to a simulation, and the take-home final is an analysis of one or two decisions made during the simulation experience. In the analysis, students apply three moral theories to analyze the decision(s), compare and contrast arguments for ethical action vis-à-vis the decision, and conclude with recommendations for how they could have responded more ethically. As with double-loop learning intentions, the paper is not an *ex post facto* justification of decisions but is rather an

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[15] Argyris and Schön, *Theory in Practice*, 24.

ethical appraisal of those decisions. It is challenging for students. The initial single loop learning is important, as reasoning through a decision again helps to solidify skills in producing a carefully reasoned moral argument from at least one moral value perspective. Rethinking which moral value perspective(s) is (are) most appropriate draws students into questioning their initial assumptions. The essays that they produce are, for the most part, highly engaging and thoughtful. Even when students are early on their journey of developing ethical reasoning skills, the intensity of the simulation experience and the opportunity to reflect even when, or maybe particularly when, they know the reflection will be read and graded generates papers that capture their voices, elements of self-reflection, and animated engagement with moral theories.

Conclusion

My approach to teaching ethics is informed by Peace and Conflict Studies as a discipline, with its interest in creative problem-solving. This past fall, I had several memorable conversations with a mature student who was delighted to find Ethics of Peacebuilding so practical. She mentioned several times over the semester how she found herself thinking more about ethics in her daily life. Other students had similar responses. Indeed, this last semester a highly engaged set of students routinely stayed after class to further discuss issues and concerns. While it is hazardous to generalize, there appears to be a pattern, namely that students are surprised to find ethics *practical* in the sense that it relates to their daily lives and decisions. The assumption appears to be that ethics and moral reasoning are otherwise separate from daily life. For several years, I too was reticent to use the term "ethics" for fear that it would relegate my concerns to a highly select and separate audience. However, I have found this not to be the case. It turns out that a lot of people are interested in what it means to be good, do good, and contribute to collective flourishing, and that there is much to be learned in the process of teaching ethics.

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