

## **Building A Community (Make That Two): Community Relations Education in Northern Ireland**

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It used to be said of the Northern Ireland situation that it was not one problem but two: first of all was the problem itself, then the problem of agreeing what the problem was. The peace process that has tottered unsteadily from the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 through to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and beyond to the on/off new governmental arrangements, is one that also lends itself to a variety of analyses. The narratives that have been created to explain how the war was brought to a conclusion – or, in some versions, transformed from one type of conflict to another – invariably reflect their places of origin. To political scientists (O'Leary 2001) the Good Friday Agreement represents the triumph of politics with a capital "P", the ability of political elites to negotiate a consociational solution to an ethnonationalist conflict. The achievement of such an agreement holds promise, not only for Northern Ireland itself, but for other interstate conflicts in other parts of the world, from Kashmir to the Basque Country, from Dubrovnik to Quebec. At the Bush-Blair summit in Belfast in April 2003 the two world leaders even suggested it could provide the inspiration that would help solve the most intractable conflict of all, that in the Middle East.

The success is not always attributed to Britain and Ireland's own politicians. Some political scientists have emphasised the importance of exogenous forces, such as the role of the European Union in diminishing the rival claims of sovereignty, or the crucial role played by the Clinton Presidency in mediating the negotiations. For conflict resolution theorists the American contribution is a striking illustration of what is termed Third Party Intervention, and one of the few points in recent history when American foreign policy in another country's affairs is seen in altruistic terms.

A more cynical view is taken by the military analysts. Those like Geraghty (1998), Taylor (1998), Maloney (2002) and English (2003) who have studied the dynamics of the war between the British Army and the IRA over its thirty year history conclude that the war ended in a shared recognition that neither side would ever claim victory, just as neither side would ever be defeated. That stalemate had been reached in the 1980s, and the war weariness which followed eventually persuaded the antagonists – amongst whom we must also include the loyalist paramilitaries – to sue for peace. The politicians were only eventually given their cue when the military forces decided they were necessary, and the negotiating space they were afforded was determined by their respective strengths in the armed conflict.

There is a third set of arguments which chooses to place "people power" or, in updated parlance, civil society, in the driving seat. This narrative had already been created at the end of the Cold War to explain how Eastern European dictatorships crumbled in the face of resistance from their own citizens. In the Northern Ireland version, local politicians came under pressure from those in voluntary and community organisations who had developed a new language of conflict resolution and wanted to see it applied so that the long remorseless war could be brought to a conclusion (Opsahl 1993, Fitzduff 2002). In the phrase of Fergal Cochrane these are the "unsung heroes" (Cochrane 2001:137) of the peace process, whose achievement has been to broaden understanding and model new forms of organisational behaviour based on tolerance, equity and inclusivity. If that seems a little idealistic, it should be pointed out that it is more than just a theory. The European Union has constructed a series of funding measures which literally invest in the hope that the voluntary and community sectors can help build peace from the grassroots up. The investment is considerable. In the seven years from 1996 to 2002 a total of £800 million has been channelled through two successive "Peace Programmes" with the money going to organisations which promote

community development or community relations or which can be seen, in one way or another, to assist in the processes that build strong and tolerant social relations. Unsurprisingly, adult learning has been a key site of development. The categories of funding do not yield to a sectoral analysis that would allow an accurate quantification of funds invested in adult education, but a recent survey of voluntary organisations conducted by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (Scope 2003, 9) suggests that approximately 28% of monies are directed to adult education and training. The obvious question then is - does it work? In what ways, and to what extent, can peace be learned? And, if new models have been developed in Northern Ireland, can they be used to help resolve other ethnic conflicts?

### **Community Relations Education – Constructing A Typology**

There has been no single model for peace education in Northern Ireland; indeed there is not even a generic term for the range of anti-sectarian and cross-community initiatives that have been launched over the years, save for the catch-all descriptor of “community relations work”. Even that terminology is not accepted by those who wish to present a more politically challenging face for their practice, and so I shall attempt to lay out here an inventory of the main ways in which the educational paradigm has been constructed. I am listing five, and though it would be possible to divide and subdivide even further, the five are:

#### **1. Knowledge Against Prejudice.**

The Enlightenment assumptions about the mission of education would appear to have obvious relevance for Northern Ireland. The “myth of atavism”, as it has been termed (Vincent 1993, 123) has a powerful hold, particularly on the attitudes of outsiders. In this view the people of Northern Ireland are trapped in a pre-modern bog, blinded by prejudice and ignorance, and unable to grasp their common humanity and shared interests. To leapfrog into modernity they must be encouraged to loosen the ties that bind them to religion and myth, and by studying history, literature and culture arrive at a more rational relationship with their neighbours and their history. In the early stages of the conflict the British Government invested heavily in a schools programme called “Education For Mutual Understanding” which created a common history curriculum for both Catholic and Protestant schools. In parallel moves adult education bodies attempted to promote programmes that used the university disciplines to help to blow away the mists of prejudice and misunderstanding. The emphasis on perception, or misperception, angered those who argued that the political violence was rooted in structural inequality and that attitudes had to be regarded as symptoms, rather than causes of the conflict. In more recent times, the sudden rise of ethnic tensions in other parts of Europe has reconfigured the Northern Ireland conflict as part of the postmodern disorder, and the new politics of identity place the Northern Ireland conflict in the centre of contemporary debate rather than as an isolated anachronistic throwback. As the writer and critic Edna Longley has put it: “Thirty years ago I used to wish that Northern Ireland would get more like the rest of the world; today I fear that the rest of the world is getting more like Northern Ireland.” (Longley 2001, 8) Enlightenment modes of thought no longer seem to carry such obvious solutions, and the undiluted strength of sectarian hostility that persists even - I am tempted to say particularly – amongst new generations of university graduates does not encourage faith in the power of knowledge to dissolve sectarianism.

#### **2. Cross Community Contact**

Appeals to reason have long been accompanied by educational programmes which put the stress on affective learning, and on the need for people who live in such a remarkably segregated society to have the opportunity to meet, to discuss, and to discover their commonalities. The Forsterian edict – “only connect” provides its own justification in this situation. Special residential centres such as Corrymeala on the northern coast of Northern Ireland or Glencree in the Republic allow a safe environment for the exploration of identity, and the churches, the trade unions and community organisations have all promoted cross community exchanges of one sort or another. These can have academic content, and where they do the emphasis, unsurprisingly, is on history. More often however the programmes are

designed to explore attitudes and beliefs and to work through the exploration of feelings towards new shared understandings and the building of trust across the sectarian divide. Attitudinal change is the assumed (but seldom stated) intention of such activity, and the larger political issue are subordinated in order to retain the focus on improving person to person or community to community relationships.

Cross community exchanges in Northern Ireland resemble “contact” programmes in other divided societies and are open to the same type of critique. In his work on multicultural educational exchange programmes in the United States, for example, McCarthy, has examined the ideological assumptions and desired outcomes of programmes designed to replace earlier, assimilationist approaches to education and concluded that cultural understanding programmes again fall short of the aspiration to generate more harmonious relationships when they “abandon the crucial issues of structural inequality and differential power relations in society”.

### **3. Anti-Sectarian Education**

By contrast, issues of power and inequality are upfront in anti-sectarian training. As the name suggests this approach draws inspiration from anti-racist training in Britain, and begins from the same political starting point: sectarianism, like racism, is deemed to be systemic and institutionalised, and workshop discussions are structured to allow this fundamental truth to be explored through an examination of organisational practices and the life experiences of the participants. The excesses of the anti-racist programmes of local government in Britain in the 1980s have been criticised (Vertovec: 49 -69) for their essentialist assumptions, and their treatment of “cultural communities” as unmeltable and homogenised collectives, where values and behaviours are evenly shared amongst all members. This degree of stereotyping may have been avoided in training programmes such as, for example, the workshops organised by The Irish Congress of Trade Unions’ anti-sectarian training unit, Counteract, where the emphasis is kept on the beam in union members’ own eye, but in other cases the attempt to utilise approaches developed in anti-racist programmes creates an equivalence that jars with local sensibilities. While republicans may enjoy the moral capital of being seen as the victims of institutionalised sectarianism, Protestants or unionists are understandably unhappy with their place in the dock, charged with maintaining unjust and oppressive structures.

**4. Single Identity Work.** An increasingly important trend has been to insist that the dysfunctional relationships between the two communities can only be overcome by working on each community’s own sociopathology independently to improve confidence and self-respect. Before ethnic difference can be transcended it must first be asserted and legitimated – then, and only then, can the two cultures meet as equals. Irish nationalists must be assured that Irish language and culture can be given free expression, just as Ulster unionists must be given confidence to believe that their British or Ulster-Scots heritage enjoys equal respect. Government funding has been of huge significance here, not just because of the tide of resources (and patronage) that has been channelled towards cultural organisations on both sides of the divide, but because of the legitimacy that government funding carries with it. In practical terms, the educational output can be measured in courses in Irish language, politics and culture on one side, and Ulster-Scots language, politics and culture on the other. The danger of all of this ethnic affirmation is its self-fulfilling nature: the two cultural blocs take on a more permanent status without the fluidity or movement that would allow for recognition of shared identities. The extreme form of this sundering of a common domain is the one now taking place in the former Yugoslavia where the common language of Serbo-Croat is being deconstructed to allow two new languages, Serb and Croat, to develop.

**5. Celebrating Cultural Traditions** A more benign outcome for Northern Ireland’s cultural wars is the one in which the toxicity is siphoned out of the two dominant cultures, and each comes to appreciate the richness of the other’s tradition. Most versions of this, in an attempt to erode the hegemonic power of the two blocs, also emphasise the importance of the small

but growing number of immigrant communities. Detaching cultural formations from their political underpinnings, organisations like Diversity 21 or the Community Relations Council organise fairs, concerts, conferences and other events where Chinese dancers, Orange drummers, Irish harpers, and community theatre groups can come together in a cultural *melange* that is intended to celebrate not difference – with its connotations of antagonism – but diversity. The intent is overtly educational, but inside a paradigm that assumes reconciliation as the end objective, at least reconciliation that fits within the definition given in Norman Porter's book "The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland". Here reconciliation is presented as "*a dynamic process through which we are opened up to others and, as a consequence, broadened in our understanding of ourselves and the world.*" (Porter 2003, 67)

The emphasis on culture, it should be noted, is a relatively recent one. In the early stages of the conflict the concern of many analysts - particularly Marxists - was with jobs and housing and the other material indicators of structural inequality. In the 1990s the new paradigm of ethnic conflict arose, driven in no small measure by the development of ethnic and interstate conflicts elsewhere, and the focus shifted from relationships with the state to intercommunal relations, and to the importance of the cultural dimension. The insights generated by bodies like the Cultural Traditions Group in the 1990s helped pave the way for a reformulation of the central political problem, which up until the mid 1990s had been seen as a zero sum game where either the nationalists' claim for an Irish identity would win out, or else the unionists' claim for a British identity. The two were seen to be not only mutually antagonistic, but mutually exclusive. Edna Longley's metaphor of Northern Ireland as "cultural corridor" (Longley 1993, 340) with British and Irish identities open at either end, is also a metaphor for the overlapping of political identities that underpins the Good Friday Agreement. As well as deriving its insights from the cultural arena, the Good Friday agreement also opens up the possibility of further fluidity and debate about cultural issues: to put it another way, the Good Friday Agreement does not mark the end of the conflict, but represents an important staging post of the transformation of the conflict from a violent struggle to one fought out on the cultural terrain (Fitzduff, 2002). For educationalists this represents a shift on to home territory. Culture, both as a binding force, and as a source of further demarcations and divisions, is likely to shape the curriculum for some time to come.

Finally, it is worth considering how the internal culture of adult education shapes all of the above. The statistics for adult learning courses year on year show the same gender imbalance: adult education is for the most part women's education. The 3:1 ratio of female to male students is perhaps not unusual in the UK or in the rest of Ireland, but within the politics of Northern Ireland it does take on a particular meaning. The gendering of political roles has very deep roots, and was given memorable expression in Sean O'Casey's great trilogy of plays about the Easter Rising, where the male characters were shown as drunk on power and zealotry, while the women were left to pick up the pieces and to appeal for common sense and humanity. These roles were dramatically reprised in the 1970s when, following a particularly reckless series of killings, a group of women came out in the streets in spontaneous protest. The leaders of the Peace People, as they became known, received the Nobel Peace Prize before falling back into obscurity. A generation later a network of women's groups has grown up and for many of these groups education is the core activity. The network, which crisscrosses the sectarian divide, has involved itself in all the forms of educational activity outlined in the above typology, and in the 1990s, in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement, it found its political expression in the non-sectarian Women's Coalition, a political grouping which characterises itself through an emphasis on accommodation, facilitation and compromise rather than defined attitudes on issues of constitutional identity.

### **Does It Work?**

Questions of efficacy are notoriously difficult in this area of work. When questioned on it, practitioners of community relations education in Northern Ireland are fond of quoting Mao

Tse Tung's reflection on the success of the French Revolution ("too early to say"). Funders, however, are less concerned with the problem of premature evaluation and there have been a series of evaluation reports on educational programmes funded through the EU Peace Programmes. The tone is generally upbeat. A report commissioned by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, for example, concluded that the funding of a number of community-based educational projects was justified in terms of the contribution to peace and reconciliation:

Education opens many doors and many eyes. The momentum has been created that will eventually resolve the current political deadlock: people are calling out for it in the communities and much of the credit must go to the groups that have taken on the huge issue of education in recent years. (McGill 1999, 39)

In his study of the NGO sector, Cochrane (2001, 137-159) reaches a more tentative conclusion, but his verdict is still displays the same optimism. In these, and similar surveys, there is a tendency to move too quickly through the gears, zooming from a few case studies out to generalisations about changes within the broader society. The micro, the mezo and the macro levels are too easily conflated, and new evaluative tools are waiting to be devised. (Church, Shouldice 2003).

To return to the first question, we still do not understand enough – or we do not have sufficient agreement – on how the Troubles were brought to an end. In a special *Millennium* issue on how wars are brought to a conclusion Hidemi Suganami (1999:631) rightly reminds us that, in our search for explanations, we should never lose sight of "the great river of circumstances" that combine together at particular times to produce particular outcomes. In the case of Northern Ireland's peace process the outcomes were unpredicted and, indeed, unknowable in advance: the serendipitous coming together of different currents proved more important than the aggregate of the various elements. The same can be said of the different types of peace education that have been tried out in Northern Ireland: their impact is not attributable to any one model over another, but to the confluence of different and sometimes competing styles of educational engagement. And the process of peace-building, like the conflict itself, still has a long way to run.

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