

UNU/UNESCO International Conference

“Pathways Towards a Shared Future”

An Interpretative Report from Workshop 2 on Higher Education and Peace, Democracy & Dialogue

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Speakers: Ambassador Emile Rwamasirabo, the Republic of Rwanda; Professor Deepika Udagama, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka; Ms. Gabriela Warkentin de la Mora, Mexico; Professor Kazuo Takahashi, United Nations University, Japan.

Workshop 2 focused on the role of institutions of higher education (IHEs) in furthering peace, democracy and dialogue. The main part of the discussion centered on the responsibility of IHEs to foster a culture of peace, democracy and dialogue among students and the wider society. Additional comments explored the importance of research in helping identify and elucidate the conditions for peace and democratic governance, including the relationship between them. In order to shed light on these general questions, the four speakers each provided a case study from his or her own country (Rwanda, Japan, Sri Lanka, Mexico), all of which have their own unique features when it comes to the topics in question.

Summary

Ms. Warkentin began the proceedings by outlining a general model of education for peace, democracy and dialogue drawn from her own experience in Mexico and Latin America more broadly. In exploring how IHEs can help foster a culture of peace, democracy and dialogue, she identified two key elements, those of “experiencing otherness” and “communicating differences.” The experience of otherness is crucial since “knowing that there are others around us, who think differently, live differently, and hold different perspectives in life, and being able not just to cohabit with them but actually live with them, is a condition *sin qua non* for talking about peace, dialogue and democracy.” Just the recognition of otherness is not enough, however – we need also to find ways of challenging the established communication patterns that compound differences and exacerbate conflict. A discourse oriented towards peace, Warkentin argued, “explores conflict formation, gives voice to all parties, makes conflict transparent, focuses on the invisible effects of violence, exposes untruths on all sides, and highlights the aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation. In sum, it presents a more holistic and complex narrative, devoid of sheer antagonism of those in direct confrontation.” Importantly, this is not simply a matter of adding new subjects to the curriculum. “What we are talking about is not a content someone can learn; it is a way of living, of understanding society; it is an experience.”

Each of the other speakers reflected and expanded on these and related themes from his or her own perspective and experience. Ambassador Rwamasirabo shared a hopeful experience from Rwanda where in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide the National University of Rwanda undertook a major new programme of peace education. In line with Ms. Warkentin's thinking, this programme combined new, targeted course work with wider experiences. Initiatives thus included a revision of admission policy to recruit a diverse student population based on merit alone; introduction of a new foundation course for all first year students aimed at developing critical thinking, including initiation to philosophy, psychology, history of Rwanda, ethics and Rwandan culture, with a focus on tolerance, human rights and reconciliation; involvement in national reconstruction through research on such issues as justice and constitutionalism; and the active involvement of the student population in university governance based on democratic practices. Students were also encouraged to engage with the wider community outside the campus through outreach activities focusing, for example, on HIV/AIDS. The ambassador described a student population which enthusiastically embraced these activities (although he also observed that the staff felt less compelled to participate as existent incentive structures did not reward it).

Professor Udagama's dissection of the Sri Lankan higher education system, by contrast, painted a much more sobering picture of the ability of IHEs to promote peace, democracy and dialogue. Sri Lanka is a long-standing democracy with a well-developed education system and high literacy rates, yet the country for more than three decades has suffered debilitating internal violent conflicts. According to Udagama, Sri Lanka IHEs have done little to overcome this paradox and may indeed have contributed to it. Our education system, she argued, is too much oriented towards the job market – “the creation of good citizens who are socially sensitive and possess requisite skills of upholding democracy and pluralism is almost sought of as a post-script.” There is too much emphasis on “hard” subjects such as natural sciences, English and information technology, at the expense of the humanities and social sciences; teaching methodologies fail to encourage free thinking and active participation by the student; and the promotion of schools with mono-ethnic identities only deepen existing cultural divides, reinforcing mutual suspicions and stereotypes. Clearly, these traits contrast sharply with the models of education for peace, democracy and dialogue proposed by Warkentin and Rwamasirabo. “The education system”, Udagama thus concluded, “which should be a bridge-builder, promoting mutual understanding and respect has, on the contrary, become a dividing factor. [It] has failed in fostering a democratic and pluralistic ethos among the recipients of education. This failure obtains with regard to both values and concomitant skills. The system therefore has failed to produce a citizenry that could contribute to the resolution of serious political and socio-economic problems.”

Speaking last, Professor Takahashi provided an important counter-perspective. While sharing the belief of his three colleagues that IHEs *can* and should contribute to a culture of peace, democracy and dialogue, he pointed out that there are inherent tensions, too, between higher education and these values. Higher education, for example, will tend to sharpen differences over such issues as national history and social justice – the more education, the more seeds of conflicts. Further, exposure to differences may simply

enhance group identity and reinforce us-them attitudes. These observations pointed to a key conclusion, supported also by the case studies, that promoting a culture of peace, democracy and dialogue, while crucial, is an immensely difficult challenge where effects can be difficult to trace, few activities are unambiguously positive, and resistance among key stakeholders can be strong.

The role of research for peace, democracy and dialogue received less attention in the workshop than that of the education and socialization of students, reflecting the personal background and interests of the speakers. However, some salient observations were made regarding the need for further exploration of the conditions for, and associations between, peace, democracy and dialogue: Takahashi pointed out that liberalist assumptions of a close link between peace, democracy, and dialogue are problematic and needs to be much further discussed and explored. Warkentin and Ugadama both confirmed this, providing practical examples of how democracy in neither Latin America, nor Sri Lanka has led to peace. Indeed, in Latin America, workshop participants were told, recent surveys have shown that a majority of people today say they would give up democracy if it would bring better governance and socio-economic prospects.

Related to the first point, several speakers commented on the complexity of the concept and reality of peace, which embraces a wide variety of situations and processes. It is very difficult, Warkentin emphasized, to talk about peace in Latin America in general terms. Some countries have experienced open wars; some have political conflicts; some are experiencing ravaging insecurity that encompasses street and organized crime. Peace is therefore not easily defined – historical circumstances have to be considered, ideological frameworks have to be reviewed, social horizons have to be outlined. Rwamasirabo made a similar point, highlighting the many forms of violence facing societies – war, ethnic hatred, sexual abuse, political persecution, racism. “The understanding of the concept of peace,” he concluded, “let alone the way to educate people about peace, is so diverse that is impossible to have a one-fit-all model of peace education.”

Finally, while none of the speakers provided solutions as such to any of these “riddles”, Rwamasirabo offered at least an entrance point, by pointing to the value of the concept of human security as an organizing principle for thinking about and constructing peace. This is not a novel idea, of course, but one that clashes with liberalist assumptions of the primacy of politics. Importantly, it resonates with the experience in many countries where peace and democracy have broken down or are being eroded in the face of continuing poverty and human rights abuses.

Recommendations

Participants in the workshop strongly advocated for a serious dialogue among policymakers, academics and students regarding the role of IHEs in promoting peace, democracy and dialogue, especially in conflicted societies. For this purpose, they offered a number of general propositions:

Universities need to be more socially engaged. They should not be ivory tower institutions, but be actively involved, through teaching as well as research, with the broader society in exposing and debating the problems of the day and finding workable solutions.

Universities need to actively promote a culture of peace, democracy and dialogue among its students. Such a culture cannot simply be taught; it must be experienced. This requires attention not only to the content of courses, but also to the methods of teaching and the broader experience of university life. More students should be offered a broad liberal arts education, with greater focus on the humanities and social sciences and space to follow their curiosity. The classroom should offer an experience in diversity, dialogue and democracy. Students need to be encouraged to participate and to relate critically to their teachers, the media and other “authoritative” sources of information and analysis. There is a need also for more interaction with the wider community, through outreach, internships etc. Students should be exposed to how people live, and learn to respond to real life problems and situations. In sum, the overall experience of university must be one of diversity, equality, and democracy.

More field research is needed on the notions of peace and democracy in concrete cases, the processes that lead to and sustain these values (or the opposite), and the relationship between them. Priority areas for inquiry include the validity of dominant liberal assumptions about the association between peace, democracy, dialogue and indeed education; the role of the state, the media and other powerful groups in manipulating social discourse; and how to deal with the problematic nature of “reality” and “truth”, which, as beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

In order to ensure that both students and staff actively engage in these areas, admission criteria and incentive structures should be revised accordingly to attract and encourage those who exhibit the required qualities. In addition, since international financial institutions and other donors, through the funding of particular programmes and scholarships (and not others), play a crucial role in shaping the content and structure of higher education in developing countries, they should be urged to support the needs of education and research for democracy, peace and dialogue.