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Co-ordinating Peace Research and Education in Australia: a report on the Canberra forum of 2 May, 2008.

Peace research and education is a growing field in Australia, as indeed is the case around the world. The UNESCO *World Directory of Peace Research and Training Institutions* (2000) lists some 580 peace training institutes or centres throughout the world. In Australia, there has been a similar growth in the number of peace centres and peace courses. Yet, despite this, the teaching of peace within Australian universities, for a range of complex reasons, remains largely unco-ordinated, without an agreed curriculum or methodology.

On 2 May 2008, Australian university teachers involved in peace and conflict studies met in Canberra to engage in a forum to discuss how better to organize and co-ordinate university-level peace education in Australia. The forum was organized by the Centre for Peace Studies at the University of New England, under the auspices of a research project entitled 'The Professionalization of Peace Education through Wiki Networking and Innovative Teaching Methods' (2007), and funded by the Australian Council for Learning and Teaching. This forum followed on from earlier consultations regarding professionalising peace research in Australia (Page, 2005). The forum raised a number of issues, which might be of interest to a wider context outside of Australia. I should emphasize that the following listing of issues and innovations is a personal response to the meeting, and does not reflect any official agenda or programme of action from the organizers.

One suggested innovation was a Wiki peace studies website, dealing with peace research and education issues, and moderated by academics involved in the field. This suggestion was motivated in part by the impact of the seemingly ubiquitous Wikipedia, which appears to be an increasing source of reference, most often unofficially, for many students. As Schweitzer (2008) argues, the degree to which Wikipedia is being used is probably underestimated, as students tend not to admit to using this website as a source.

One problem with Wikipedia is that although it may operate according to a very good set of rules, these are often applied in a haphazard fashion. There is thus no assurance that the material on Wikipedia is accurate. Moreover, as Hardy (2007) points out, Wikipedia is notorious for bitter content disputes, especially, and somewhat ironically, over articles dealing with peace and war. At the forum, it was suggested that a Wiki peace studies or peace education website might be a way of providing and maintaining a more stable and informed website source, and indeed such a website has now been established by the University of New England (2008).

An overriding concern was that peace researchers in Australia need to connect with colleagues in other countries within the local region. One logical reason to do this is that there is in fact much latent and actual conflict within the Indo-Pacific region and it thus makes sense to be in contact with peace researchers in conflict regions. Australia is also a resource-rich country within a region with many resource-poor countries, and on this basis there is a strong ethical argument that Australia ought to be providing resource

support to peace researchers, both within educational institutions and within NGOs, in the region.

There were a number of suggestions from the forum regarding how to operationalize this engagement with the region. One suggestion was that peace researchers become more involved in the Asia Pacific Peace Research Association (APPRA), which is a regional branch of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA). An alternative suggestion is that a new organization be formed, the Indo-Pacific Peace Research Association, which would focus in the region closer to Australia, including Indonesia and the Pacific. Another possibility, although this was not canvassed at the forum, is greater involvement with UNESCO in the Asia Pacific Region.

The forum canvassed innovative methods for teaching peace. These included: simulated interactions between students in conflict situations, and viewing/discussing videos of these simulations; case studies; field visitation in conflict situations; using film and video for students to create a less threatening way of examining issues which would normally be seen as threatening; using the anonymity of on-line teaching to allow students from minority groups the freedom to contribute without feeling stereotyped as minority students; and using popular culture, in the form of movie excerpts and songs, as starting points for discussion and debate.

One overall concern was the marginalization of peace within debate and discourse on national security. This is by no means unique to Australia. However frequently happens is that the language of public discourse, driven largely by the news media, concentrates on the language of threat and how we can meet these threats. Moreover the assumption is often that the response to threats needs to be a military response. Public discourse is often highly nationalistic. Peace research emphasizes a structural response to problems, and the possibility that Australia itself may be part of the global problem, both in our foreign policy and in our lack of action on other issues, is rarely canvassed in public discourse.

The paucity of funding for peace research and education was another concern, especially on comparison to military research and education. There is something of a contrast here. Australian universities are often keen to accept the kudos for the expansion of peace research and education, although peace research and education tends to be very poorly funded, especially in comparison to the more traditional departments or schools of politics and international relations. With both the marginalization of peace and the paucity of funding for peace research, increased co-operation between those involved in peace education and research may be part of the answer.

The definition of peace itself arose as another issue. Peace research, at least as understood through the work of Johan Galtung, generally insists that peace be regarded as an integrative notion, involving direct, social and cultural peace (1996). However how inclusive ought our definition of peace be? For instance, peace includes ecological and social justice concerns. For many peace educators, the relationship of a society with indigenous cultures is a central issue. In other words, we cannot possibly have a

normative commitment to peace if we do not recognize the importance of our indigenous population and the dispossession they have suffered.

Perhaps the most interesting comments were on the very idea of the professionalization of peace education. This term implies greater co-ordination within a particular field of teaching and research, and also that there is a greater social impact by the particular of the field of teaching and research. Yet one delegate suggested we ought to be wary of the idea of professionalization of peace education and wary of the technicist idea of a peace education expert. It was suggested that, ultimately, peace education is about educational relationship and empowering the other.

The discussion on the direction of peace research and education in Australia will continue. The author welcomes any input from readers within the region or indeed from outside of the region, and this will be forwarded on to future forums.

Dr James Page

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