



by Szilard Strenner



# Bring more peace

## into non-formal education

### *Peace and violence in learning groups*

The aim of this article is to show that despite the qualitative opposition between peace and violence, the two often cannot be separated in practice. The other aim is to observe the different forms of violence that occur within non-formal education (NFE) based on that understanding. Though trainers in NFE are supposedly aware of peaceful and democratic educational approaches and principles and would like to see their courses and trainings as peaceful and non-violent as possible...the reality seems to be far from that. In my article I introduce the milestones of my learning paths and show how I amended my trainer and course organiser practice previously known as fully peaceful and democratic.

## A quotation

About a year ago I found a poem "First they came..." from the Lutheran Pastor, Martin Niemöller (1892-1984).

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out  
because I was not a communist;  
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out  
because I was not a socialist;  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out  
because I was not a trade unionist;  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out  
because I was not a Jew;  
Then they came for me  
and there was no one left to speak out.

Psychologists say people learn most of their thinking, values and attitudes from their ancestors. When we think about the lives of our relatives and add the theories of modern psychology, we can get to the conclusion, that if our grandparents were victims or witnesses (not to mention contributors) to the numerous genocides of the 20th Century, their children might have inherited some similar thinking, values and attitudes that made the war and terror possible.

It is also said, that in countries where democracy was established only in the last decades, societies have not yet been able to digest the holocaust or the communist regimes in order to heal or cure themselves. Experts say these societies have much to do to get rid of scapegoats or other false strategies for living. This made me think that maybe I myself, as a member of our society, have similar attitudes that I am not aware of at all. Probably I also have a lot to do personally.

## Some theories

When I found the quotation, I also found the core element of this article among the theories of the Norwegian Johan Galtung. Galtung says peace is not the lack of war. The lack of war is negative peace. The concept of peace or violence must cover all kinds of violence. War is a radical attack against human communities. Armistice is not equal to peace. There can be massive pain, wounds, and even dead people too. Something happened that is irreversible. Treatment may occur but the painful memories will not go away.

According to Galtung there are at least three other kinds of violence:

- **Cultural violence:**  
discrimination, threat, manipulation, debate
- **Direct violence:**  
abuse, mistreatment, taking one's freedom
- **Structural violence:**  
hierarchy, law, roles, procedures, bureaucracy

Galtung also says that conflict and violence must be separated. There is a clear distinction.

**Conflict** is a possibility that can develop in any direction based on creativity. According to Kenneth Boulding, conflict is one of many different forms of competition for limited goals or resources (1962). When there is a conflict situation amongst different roles, people, groups or nations, they may feel tension, heat. There is no harm yet; only the tangible tension of misunderstandings, confusion or of limited resources, clashing interests and so on. Needs will bring responses to a conflict situation and the applied core values will shift the solution towards peace or violence.

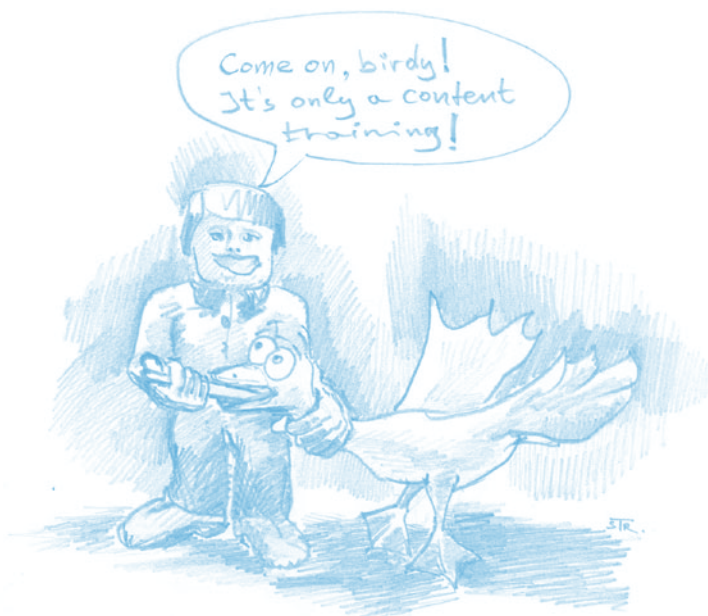
It is **violence**, when one, using his or her power, makes another person or group do something it does not want, or takes something away *with force against their free will*, they will mind it afterwards. There is also harm, pain and damage and other *irreversible results*. **Peace** (positive peace) exists, when all the basic needs are fulfilled and there is a range of possibilities to develop.

*Peace and violence are qualities in this theory.* In this model I see a **continuum** where on one end you might find completely peaceful solutions, trust and cooperation. The other end is absolute violence. There is fear, pain and an unequal world of winners and losers. Conflict is not in between. **Conflict is a seed, a possibility to develop somewhere.**

## An experience

I took part in a training course for trainers where despite my high expectations, the training turned out to be massively violent. During the three days of the training, the trainers (with the best intentions) thrust a huge amount of content down our throats without really listening to us, recognising our real needs or properly dealing with our desperate resistance. What is more, they called it a “content-training”, and asked for our active participation between the shallow power-point presentations. We tried but could not change the process and they completed their mission.

It is harsh but I use the words outrage and terror to describe these days because our articulated resistance drew no attention; the trainers stuck to the plan and avoided real communication with us.



**“There is no way  
to peace.  
Peace is the way.”**

Mahatma Gandhi

## Summary

The **quotation** taught me that there is a lot to do with my awareness; to really know who I am and what I do. The **theories** tell me violence is not only killing or hurting people. It has many visible and invisible forms as well. In my understanding, violence can be anything that is not fully peaceful. Violence does not satisfy the needs of participants and limits growth wherever it occurs. Through the **experience**,

I learned that there can be violence in a non-formal setting and people may suffer from it. Doubting myself led me to the understanding that I may create abuse too.

When I start to talk to colleagues about this “peace-violence” theory many of them think I expect trainers to be totally laissez-faire; they should smile and be tender all the time. Perhaps they misunderstand me and think that to be peaceful is equal to being gentle. My reply goes like this: this theory is not only about how to lead a session, it is more complex and trainers have to be able to respond to participants’ needs in the current situation; applying several styles and tools. Even shouting might be a relevant, peaceful tool, when it is needed – to prevent an accident, or gather the group’s attention in a second. Being peaceful does not require anyone to be nice and kind for 24 hours. A trainer should be genuine I think. Although my article focuses on the trainers, I would also mention the course organisers who have many chances to create peaceful environments and preparation phases. Violence may come from them too.

I still think violence is bad, we should avoid it as much as possible but my recent experience shows that training courses can still contain a certain amount of it. I think it is unavoidable.

In the following part of the article you will find some examples that explain my understanding of this theory of violence. Then you can read about some aspects of violence, like power and responses to the misuse of power. In the final part you will find my responses and how I try to create safer and more peaceful training courses.

## Examples

Observing conflict-responses in my environment (how violent or peaceful they are), became my “hobby”: I observed trainings, seminars, conferences, lectures, even discussions - sometimes as a victim, sometimes as an offender - and how the trainer’s (leader’s) interventions served the needs of participants or not.

### *I gathered the following violent experiences amongst non-formal educational settings:*

- Sending out invitations or calls for applications very late, so potential participants are not able to come or to make a good decision about their enrolment.
- Implementing trainings without enthusiasm: without fire and passion so that it becomes routine and our numbness decreases the enthusiasm of learners.
- Not understanding participants’ questions and opinions.
- To decide too soon about the level and content of the training and the methods to be used. Then trainees’ interests and real needs will hardly fit to the course.
- Gathering but not understanding participants’ expectations. The trainers assume they understand participants properly.
- Not sleeping enough during long-term training courses. It breaks down the capacity and awareness of trainers.
- Teaching something to participants when their knowledge in the subject is not checked. Some participants might be smarter and they think: this trainer thinks we are stupid!
- Cutting free-time with serious programme points, or slipping into the free time.
- Not knowing the background of the participants or their expectations.
- Using weak communication or misleading instructions so that trainees have different understandings of what the task is.
- There is no balance between action, thoughts and emotions, so the course is only talking.
- Not cooperating with co-trainers so that a visible conflict or rivalry develops and participants feel insecure.
- Waiting for participants who are late, or trainers are late. Those who are present suffer and next time all the people will come even later.
- Asking a participant or a colleague to gather missing participants. Then people will feel as if they were in the kindergarten. The process loses its seriousness.
- And many more...

It might sound too harsh, but I call these cases violent, because they do not encourage full participation, they seize opportunities, they misuse power and limit the learning process. The longer the suffering, the bigger uncertainty, pain, lack of trust, humiliation, and oppression gets. Violence destroys groups, communities and individuals too. The list of violations and false interventions I guess, could be much longer.



## Responses to violence

Suffering from any kind of violence, victims can choose from 3 strategies:

**a) fight (resistance) or b) flee, escape or c) submission.**

Fortunately most of our participants are well equipped with these “shields” so they protect themselves. Some examples of possible responses to violence in NFE:

- Silence
- Participants do not work but rather they just chat
- They laugh, chat, have a good time but apparently they do something different to what you expect
- There are side-discussions
- People’s attention is not focused, they fall apart
- Participants are bored, they are not there mentally
- They are late, they do not appear
- You have a gut feeling that something isn’t working properly, you feel like swimming up the stream.

### *Are these responses familiar to you?*

When participants resist the harm is less painful and participants feel a certain level of control, but the learning process is shallow and limited. Resisting takes away energy and attention from both sides. Working in resistance mode makes the trainer tired. In my example my responses to the violence were fight (resistance) and flee, but they sucked my energy, creativity, and turned me into an irresponsible person criticising everything around me. For more about resistance you can read Mette Bram’s article in Coyote, Issue 3.

## Power

We already know violence happens against the free will of its victims. And here comes the question: what is the element that makes it possible to bully participants into doing something they would not otherwise do? We cannot exercise compulsion without POWER. It gives authority over our participants. We use power, when we ask them to sit in a circle – and they do it. They respect us. Power is the capacity to give punishment or reward. It keeps people in a subordinate position, sometimes in fear regardless of whether they know it or not. It helps to make people do what we want them to do. Power is a sweet thing for the superior.



I have collected some factors, which shift trainer's "power up" in relation to others:

- Age: trainers are often older, more mature, have a wider range of experience.
- White skinned, able-bodied, physically strong young men,
- Role: "He is the ordered, experienced trainer, I am only a participant."
- Excellent command of the common language(s) of the course,
- Working with "mystical" electronic equipment,
- Using methods that participants don't know,
- Dominant, extrovert personality,
- Higher educational degree, list of qualifications,
- Knowing others weaknesses,
- Beauty, being attractive etc.

Each factor is totally relative. Sometimes one thing creates power, sometimes the same thing shifts it down – it depends on the situation. Whether we are aware or not, we handle power when we lead our groups that should be the most democratic, free and participation-centred community. That is not wrong, but it is a dangerous tool, that cuts both ways. So I think, it's better to be aware of power.

For more about the power of the trainer, read Miguel Angel's article in *Coyote*, Issue 1.

## Doubt and answers

Earlier I personally nurtured a self-image of the great trainer who is the superb, peaceful guy. Recently I asked myself, Am I really peaceful? After all, the question for me is not whether I am violent or not. I know I can be. And my trainings contain violations, too. To a certain degree. Understanding these I could set more important questions:

- Where does violence come from?
- Wherein am I violent?
- How can I decrease the level of violence?
- How can I build in such conditions that protect the peaceful learning process?
- How can I bring more peace into non-formal education?

In order to decrease the level of violence and raise my awareness, my solutions are the following:

- **Teamwork** - My way is that I thrive when I work in a team of at least 2 trainers. That is safer for all.
- **Objectives** – I try to form clear learning goals for me and for the trainees whilst respecting a) the order, b) my competencies and c) the expectations of the participants attending the course.

- **Balance** - In my solution I balance the triplet of content (knowledge), action (moving-acting) and emotions (feelings) in the actual course. This opens up creativity, provides experiences and prevents boredom.
- **Recognising the violence** – Though I strive to decrease it; at the same time I also try to be fully aware of the violence I bring into the courses. If it is already there I also count on the results and the possible responses of the participants.
- **Communication & listening** - For me this is the basis of the training. I try to listen more with the full presence of myself. Being in real connection, I try to unpack the message to find the real motivation and need. I endeavour to understand and to be understood - in a common language.
- **Reading resistance** - I celebrate recognised resistance. They tell me: trainees need something else. I can ask the people: what is going on?
- **Taking risks** - I am aware: when I take risks I can win. If not, I won't. So I consciously push myself to step into the stretching zone. This is how I fight my worries and anxiety.
- **Self-awareness and supervision** - I regularly attend self-awareness courses and currently benefit from one-to-one counselling which focuses on my professional life.
- **Checklist** - Recently I created a "Safety-of-trainings" check list with 95 questions and statements on one single A4 sheet. That is a lot but helps me to develop quality!
- **Writing** - is my other solution. Like this article. Reflecting on my experiences.

Great thanks to all my colleagues, teachers and masters who let me learn and grow.

*Today is a good day for war, to come to an end.*

/Deepak Chopra/

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