A Catalyst for Action: Training and Education as Networking Platforms for Peace Projects

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Introduction

Training and capacity building are common peacebuilding interventions that represent potentially powerful platforms for change. However, there is a widespread assumption among many peace practitioners that teaching someone skills and increasing their knowledge of conflict resolution concepts will lead naturally to individual behavioral changes and aggregate into societal reductions in violence. The internal logic within this theory of change is often underspecified, assuming that increasing knowledge about how to resolve conflict effectively will make it more likely that participants will do so (Allen Nan 2010, 2). Furthermore, most of the attention is focused on *what* to teach, rather than on who, or on how to build connections to ensure that, once trained, these participants have access to information, networks, and resources to be able to turn their knowledge and attitude changes into action. In this briefing, I introduce a framework that I call the catalytic network model, and illustrate briefly how it has worked in practice in an international education/training program: The Regional Institute for the Study and Practice of Strategic Nonviolent Action in the Americas, which took place in Quito, Ecuador. This program is an example of a growing number of international training and education programs, including study abroad, that increase knowledge and skills of participants in conflict resolution, prevention, and peacebuilding (Pugh & Ross 2019).

I argue here that *who* is trained, the networks in which they are embedded, and how they stay connected to each other fundamentally influences their peacebuilding impact. My approach builds on John Paul Lederach's metaphor of the social web—that the relationships in which we are embedded are important resources for peacebuilding. It also builds on his idea of 'critical yeast'—the idea that like a sprinkling of yeast in bread, the right group of properly motivated people interacting with each other can transform social conflicts far beyond what a crude number count would suggest. (Lederach 2005: 91).

Catalytic network model

Drawing on fifteen years of international experience, I have developed the catalytic network model to describe how peace and nonviolent action are enhanced through capacity building and connection. The core insight of this approach is that program design that prioritizes building and sustaining strong relationships among key participants can have even more powerful impact on subsequent peacebuilding action than program designs that focus mostly on the content of the knowledge, concepts, and skills that are transferred during the program. In this model, the most important elements to prioritize in the program design are participant selection, relationship building and maintenance, and seed resources. Key outcomes to measure include increased knowledge, personal capacity building/professional development, motivation, new projects developed by program alumni, greater social capital, and amplified voices.

Participant selection. Given that the translation of individual knowledge and attitude changes into structural changes in participants' home communities depends on the networks and influence of the participants, strategic selection is important. Prioritizing participants who represent central nodes at the intersection of multiple networks they can leverage, and who have influence and can persuade others to adopt specific ideas or policies, maximizes impact (Cox 2007; Lederach 2005). Programs can enhance this factor by partnering with key organizations in the field that are already working with people embedded in their communities so that selected participants are integrated into local networks that they will strengthen with greater capacity when they return. Interviews and recommendations can also give information on the centrality of potential candidates' networks during the selection process.

Relationship building. Short, intense experiences outside of their comfort zones can forge unique bonding among groups of participants (Paczynska & Hirsch 2019). For some people, participating together in a training or capacity-building initiative in a different country may be their first international experience, and for others, the friends they make are of different nationalities, ethnicities, ages, or backgrounds than most people in their social circle. In this way, their co-participants can fill 'structural holes' in their networks (Burt 2001), and this feature can be a motivation for participants to maintain the relationship over time, since they are unlike other friendships that they have. The international friends they make act as 'bridges' to understanding and empathizing with other cultures, and they represent a form of transnational social capital that can be called upon in future peacebuilding efforts that require international linkages (Pugh 2013).

Relationship maintenance. While bonding often occurs during intense peacebuilding trainings, there is a tendency for these relationships to fade as people return to their homes and their everyday lives. Unless there is active and intentional cultivation and maintenance of these relationships, through ongoing cohort support, subsequent reunions, or alumni newsletters or social media groups, the salience of these contacts may diminish over time. Mentorship and communities of practice where alumni share their work and challenges, helping each other problem-solve and strategize, are additional approaches for relationship management that may be more effective than merely establishing a network and hoping that it will result in collaborative action. Infrastructure and a professional staff are important factors making relationship maintenance more likely and more sustainable, so having a core organizational host is key.

Seed resources. An important distinction between capacity-building programs focused on knowledge transfer and those supporting project development is whether structured 'seed resources' are incorporated into the program design. Project seed funding is one way that training programs encourage practical project implementation by their alumni. When financial support is not possible, programs may

subsidize professional association membership, help participants publish media pieces, and highlight their work in newsletters or podcasts. Some trainings guide participants in designing plans or proposals for practical actions that they will enact when they return home. These can be the basis for subsequent funding applications to scale up an idea into a viable peacebuilding initiative.

Outcomes

Evaluation of training impact typically involves satisfaction questions or a pre-test post-test combination to measure content learning and change in attitudes. When a training program follows the catalytic networks model, there is a more robust set of outcomes it can measure to determine the impact it has on participants and on external constituencies and contexts. Below I summarize key outcomes to measure:

Table 1: Key Program Outcomes

Increased knowledge	Peacebuilding concepts, theories, and cases that allow participants to socialize into the field, engage with other practitioners, and design better-informed interventions that reflect current best practices and well-developed theories of change.
Personal capacity building and professional development	Results in participants becoming more skilled at key tasks, or having a more competitive profile for jobs, grants, academic programs.
Attitude changes, inspiration, and motivation	Encourages participants to continue in the field or to invest time/resources in peacebuilding work.
New projects	May include NGOs, campaigns, replication trainings, etc. that build peace among a broader community that did not participate in the original training themselves, aided by technical assistance provided within the original training program (i.e. project incubators).
Greater social capital	Access to alumni networks or sponsoring organization portals that a.) increase awareness/access to opportunities and resources that make subsequent actions possible, b.) allow scaling up smaller initiatives by collaborating with people in other localities or issue areas, or c.) disseminate information.
Amplified voices	Published articles, interviews, and newsletter spotlights bring greater visibility to the peacebuilding work of participants, and provide a larger audience that they can reach to tell their own story of change (rather than having these stories filtered through donor reports or other mediated dissemination channels).

Karen Ross and I surveyed directors of peace and conflict-related international education programs and asked how they would prioritize their desired outcomes in order of importance. Greater knowledge and skills were listed as the most important outcomes, followed by developing greater empathy and producing deliverables that address real-world problems. Building useful networks was the 5th-highest outcome listed by program staff. When asking people afterward what they valued most about their participation, however, the relationships they made are often mentioned foremost. In fact, of the program staff surveyed, 2/3 had previously participated in an international education program focused on peace and conflict themselves, and 80% found that the contacts and networks made through the earlier program were relevant in facilitating their work in their current program (Pugh & Ross 2019). Likewise, in surveys one year after the program described in the section below, participants not only valued the networks and contacts they made more than they had before participating, but they reported that this community had helped them to carry out their nonviolent action work.

Program vignette

In this section, I briefly introduce an example of a capacity building program in Ecuador to illustrate how the catalytic network model can be built into a training design, and to suggest some of the outcomes that it has achieved.

Regional Institute for the Study and Practice of Strategic Nonviolent Action in the Americas

The Regional Institute is a one-week training that brings together activists, professionals, and academics from across Latin America and the Caribbean. Having completed two years/cohorts, the program is co-sponsored by an external U.S. organization with significant topical expertise, experience, and resources, and three local actors that have credibility and experience in country—two universities and an NGO that has been operating in Ecuador for 15 years. This combination created a strong partnership that has shown individual impact and ripple effects even after its first two years (Pugh 2018).

Participant selection was prioritized, with each applicant being interviewed via Skype and ranked by experience, potential impact, influence within key marginalized communities, motivation, and other criteria. Participant diversity was the top factor mentioned by participants in the evaluation as contributing to the success of their learning, so selection seemed to play an important role. The availability of external funding helped make it possible for some of the best candidates to attend who otherwise would not be able to afford participation. Relationship building was facilitated through an intense week of interaction, group meals, and a field trip. These relationships were sustained through social media groups on Facebook and WhatsApp, e-mail, and country-specific project initiatives on which alumni collaborated. Program staff and facilitators helped connect participants with key organizations and contacts to help them increase their message reach or scale up initiatives, while program participants helped recruit promising activists in their network for the following year's cohort of the regional institute (indeed, past participants were the most frequent source cited by the second year's participants where they had heard about the program). Competitive funding opportunities by one of the sponsoring organizations for follow up training and research initiatives helped seed the development of concrete actions back home.

Immediate learning objectives were successful, according to the program evaluation pre-survey and post-survey implemented immediately afterward for the 2018 cohort: a.) on a five-point scale where five represents the most knowledge, participants increased their self-reported level of knowledge about nonviolent action from 2.9 before the course to 4.4 afterward. b.) The Institute was a potential catalyst for subsequent nonviolent actions. Before the course, 44% of participants envisioned applying the knowledge they would gain directly in a nonviolent campaign. After the Institute, more than 63% thought they would do so.

According to a separate post-program survey one year later, the evidence of positive, concrete outcomes was striking. Among the 12 respondents, they reported participating (since the regional institute) in 57 nonviolent campaigns, facilitating 48 trainings and 51 classes on nonviolent action, and carrying out 27 research investigations and writing 11 articles; 79% said they had used what they learned in the regional institute in carrying out these activities. The new projects and amplified voices demonstrated here were complemented by greater social capital and motivation: respondents reported maintaining contact with an average of 12 other participants after the program, and half chose the

maximum frequency option provided on the survey (communicated more than 21 times with other participants after the program). The knowledge transfer had significant diffusion effects, as 79% of respondents reported that they had shared learnings with people involved in their same civil resistance movement. They reported that the two ways in which the community of people they met in the program had been most helpful were in providing inspiration and moral support (85%) and in increasing the channels to disseminate messages (79%). Finally, the connections they made with activists in different countries had a significant scaling up effect. Compared to responses on the pre-program survey, respondents a year later reported coordinating with other activists on nonviolent campaigns at larger geographic scales ("At what levels have you coordinated with others to help carry out a campaign of nonviolent action?"). While neighborhood level coordination was less frequently mentioned in the 1-year survey, and those reporting no coordination dropped from 30% to 0, coordination within the region and within the Americas doubled, and coordination in the city, country, and other parts of the world all increased by some 50%. These outcomes (drawn from the final report of the regional institute) are strong evidence of greater capacity and greater social capital, which empowered participants to coordinate larger-scale nonviolent action activities.

In one case, several participants whom I interviewed from the same organization returned to their home country and trained more than 300 new nonviolent action trainers, who in turn held replication programs in localities across the country. They have also been working on an online Spanish-language training portal, as an attempt to scale up their impact in a country where public transportation and political persecution create barriers to large-scale in-person trainings. Their connections through the regional institute will help this portal extend its regional reach while prioritizing the voices and experiences of the activists themselves, rather than filtering experiences through academic experts in the Global North whose work in English is translated into Spanish.

This type of action also faces challenges, of course, including potential security risks and exposure as networks become broader and more diffuse, as well as fading interest and a lack of a central organizational infrastructure (or when there is such an organization, ensuring the democratic participation of all members of the network). The model described in this briefing is further developed in (Pugh & Ross 2019), and future research will include a survey of international peacebuilders and their networks. I argued that participant selection, leveraging the existing relational webs of participants, helping them expand their networks, and providing a structure for ongoing connection all influence peacebuilding impact, and this briefing illustrates this working in practice. The participant selection being chosen as the #1 most important factor in increasing learning at the end of the Regional Institute, and the increase and continuation of participant relationships that were professionally useful show the power of leveraging existing strengths, assets, and social capital, and continuing to cultivate it. Future training designers (and policy makers/funders deciding which interventions to support) should consider that tidy evaluation outcomes that fit within a 1-year project cycle may not be the best way to maximize the power of capacity building, and investing in relationships and networks over time can lead to greater impact. The example provided in this briefing illustrates the power of training to act as a catalyst for network formation which, in turn, greatly enhances the power of participants to build peace and achieve social changes in their home countries and communities.

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