CHAPTER 12

Classrooms, Committees, and Institutional Constraints

Peace and Power happens at its best when everyone in a group chooses to work together in this way. This is not always possible in a traditional setting, but certain Peace and Power ways of working together can be adapted in almost any situation to create change.

When you bring Peace and Power into a group that exists within an institution that typically functions in hierarchical ways, you bring a powerful influence toward transformation. You can use the methods of Peace and Power as a whole, adapt them, or use them in part for moving to new power relations in traditional groups.

The key element in making decisions about what to do and how is clarity about what value or values the group chooses to embrace. From there, the group will find many ways to enact its values. The group members can then periodically examine how well they are doing in creating the value and process changes they are seeking together.

Taking steps to adapt Peace and Power processes in hierarchical organizations and institutions can be risky, frightening, and discouraging. Sometimes your efforts will fail, and sometimes groups seem unable to move beyond mere token acts of working in ways that they envision. Often the hoped-for benefits and changes that happen seem completely invisible, only to become visible long after the group has ended.

If you want to take Peace and Power into a traditional setting, one important step you can take to give you greater confidence is to create a group outside the institution where you can practice Peace and Power values more fully. This is usually a voluntary group committed to working together in order to create personal and social change. Experiencing a group where you can realize Peace and Power ideals more fully, even though it may be a small group, provides a place of centering, of concentrating your energies in a healing direction, of support for the values that you are seeking to enact, and for exploring all that might be possible. Then, when the disappointments of the old world come crashing in, the visions of the new possibilities are there, somewhere.

HOW DO WE BEGIN?

One way for groups in institutions to begin the shift is to choose one, two, or three of the PEACE powers as a starting point. Many groups work within traditions that alienate and divide individuals from one another, and people who grow weary of the divisiveness and alienation are

often eager to find a different way. Choosing at least one PEACE power implies a unifying value, provides a focus for the shifts in interaction, and maintains a grounding for times when the confusion of change becomes overwhelming.

The Internet and the Web, developed from philosophies of democratization, is a powerful tool for groups to use in equalizing power[12]. Email, distribution lists, email discussion lists, and bulletin boards offer equal access to information and give everyone an equal opportunity to "speak" without interruption or time constraints. As is true for face-to-face groups, everyone in the group must participate online—everyone has to show up.

People enter traditional groups such as classrooms, work teams, and committees expecting that the group will function as usual. When you present a different way of working together, explain the reasons for making the shift. If the reasons clearly relate to what the group has already been seeking, then the transition is relatively easy. The group can consider Peace and Power approaches as ways to help achieve what they already want to do.

If the group has a long tradition of working in hierarchical and power-over ways, making the transition will be more of a challenge. You might start by acknowledging a persistent problem that many people in the group see as a problem. Perhaps there is a lot of interruption and cross-talk in your group discussions, and many people seldom have the opportunity to speak or be heard. You can explain your concern about this, explain why you think it would be helpful to shift to another format for discussing, and propose using a form of rotating chair to make sure that people are not interrupted when they are speaking.

If you want to introduce Peace and Power to your traditional group, it is helpful to prepare written or verbal information about the intended shift that is specific to the work of the group. Focus on both the value shift and the process shift that you are proposing. In a group that has a defined leader (for example, a teacher or a committee chair), the leader can prepare a description of ways in which the group will begin to function, and why these changes are being made. If you are a leader initiating a change without the group considering this as an option, propose that the group try this new approach for a defined period of time, after which the group can discuss the experience and decide how to proceed.

Members of groups who are not the defined leader can also bring a proposal to the group. A student in a classroom can prepare a brief explanation of something they want the group to consider, and why. A member of a com- mittee or work team can prepare a similar description of a change for the group to consider. For example, a group member can propose that the group start using check-in and closing as a way to make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the agenda, and to help provide continuity from one meeting to another.

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[12] See *Democracy's Edge: Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life* by Frances Moore Lappé, *A Greater Democracy Day By Day* by Sally Mahe and Kathy Covert, and *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web* by Tim Berners-Lee.

PEACE AND POWER IN THE CLASSROOM

Traditional classrooms are especially steeped in traditions and constrained by institutional rules. However, because the typical classroom exists for the purpose of learning, it is an excellent place in which to adapt Peace and Power approaches. Peace and Power complements many approaches to teaching and learning that emphasize greater student involvement and empowerment.

Peace and Power approaches can be a breath of fresh air in a classroom, but they can also confuse people when it is not clear why the shift is happening. The traditional teacher–student power imbalance is familiar to everyone who has attended school. The teacher has the power to grade, to offer opinions and judgments, and to speak. The institution defines the student as a receiver of grades, a receiver of the teacher's opinions and judgments, and the listener. Overcoming these expectations for roles and behaviors is not easy, and some institutional expectations cannot be ignored (such as the recording of grades to represent the achievement of a certain curricular or institutional standard).

Three Peace and Power values that classroom participants usually welcome are:

- empowerment for all,
- demystification of content and processes (especially processes for grades), and
- creating unity and community.

Although you might assume that these values are central to what education is all about, they are ironically consistently undermined by typical classroom traditions. When a teacher brings alternatives to the classroom that clearly enact the values of empowerment, community, and demystification, dramatic change occurs in how teaching and learning occur.

Although the values of empowerment, community, and demystification seem easy to embrace, the actual process of making the shift is a big challenge for everyone. Some students welcome the change; others respond with varying degrees of reserve, and still others object at the outset. If people who object have no alternatives, it may not be possible to make the shift. When individ- uals who object have a choice (for example, they can enroll in another section of a college course), they are free to leave the group and pursue an alternative. Individuals who are initially hesitant but willing to stay with the group frequently relate moving stories about the inner transformations that occur for them during the group's gatherings.

WHAT DO WE DO ONCE WE SELECT A PEACE AND POWER VALUE?

The ways in which the ideas of Peace and Power influence the work of groups in hierarchical institutions will differ greatly from group to group. The value the group members decide to adopt as their principle guides their choice of method. For example, if a classroom

group decides to work with the Power of Sharing, there are many ways this can be done. They can share leadership through the rotating role of the convener and share participation by using the rotating chair during discussions. The group may choose a traditional lecture format for some classes as an avenue for enacting the value of sharing by the teacher to overcome knowledge imbalances. Or the group can choose to have the teacher lecture for part of the class time, with rotating-chair style of discussion for another part of the time. In addition, the group members can also share drafts of their written work with one another as a way to exchange ideas freely. The possibilities are unlimited.

The PEACE powers in Chapter 3 and the commitments in Chapter 4 are the basis for the suggestions in the following sections. Here the suggestions take into account typical challenges that you will encounter when you bring Peace and Power into an existing hierarchical institution. Some suggestions focus on individual behaviors, but all reflect fundamental shifts of value and attitude embraced by the whole group. For each value I have noted key Peace and Power processes that can help your group make the value real in action.

POWER OF PROCESS

Required structures such as objectives, time frames, or evaluation procedures are used as tools that provide a structure from which to work, but they are not the focal point. The process is the important dimension; the structure is only a tool and nothing more. How you interact with one another becomes the central focus. Your group takes the time to discuss your process along with the content in a classroom, or the business of the work group. Priorities related to decision-making shift, so that the urgency of making decisions lessens and the group learns to value the wisdom that comes with the process. Key process: closing.

POWER OF LETTING GO

All participants let go of old habits and ways to make room for personal and collective growth. Teachers and work-group chairs let go of power-over attitudes and ways of being; class participants and work-group members let go of tell-me-what-to-do attitudes and ways of being. Those who tend to dominate discussion let go of their tendency to speak. Those who tend to remain silent let go of their tendency to sit back and watch. All participants move into ways of being that are personally empowering and that nurture the empowerment of others. All participants share their ideas, but shift to a focus of fully hearing and understanding others' points of view. Key process: rotating chair.

POWER OF THE WHOLE

Mutual help networks within the group are encouraged. Old competitive habits are replaced with actions that reflect cooperation. Each individual makes sure that everyone in the group has any and all information that is required to be successful. Every individual is responsible for using their talents and skills to address the interests of the group as a whole. Each participant, whether

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teacher or student, leader or member, is accountable to the whole group for negotiating specific agendas, keeping the group informed about absences, leaving early, arriving late, or initiating activities. Key processes: Check-in and closing.

POWER OF COLLECTIVITY

Each participant is taken into account in the group's planning-in-process. The group works to address the needs of those who are moving into individual journeys where others may not be going. The group in some way addresses the needs of those who are having specific struggles. Individuals do not compete with one another. Instead, the group acknowledges and addresses everyone's needs as equally valuable. The group takes into account every point of view within the group in making decisions. Key processes: Rotating chair and circling.

POWER OF SOLIDARITY

The group recognizes solidarity as coming from the expression of differing points of view so that all can understand and integrate them into a richer and fuller appreciation of every individual and of the group. Out of this appreciation, each individual participates in clarifying the principle(s) that the group chooses to embrace. By actively seeking to understand the differing perspectives each person brings, the group can more fully understand what sustains them as a group. Key processes: rotating chair and Peace and Power decision-building.

POWER OF SHARING

All participants bring talents, skills, and abilities related to the work of the group and actively engage in sharing their talents. Leaders and teachers enter groups with previously developed capabilities that are shared according to the needs of the group and in consideration of the structure-as-tool. Members and participants enter the group with personal talents, backgrounds, and experiences that everyone values and shares. All participants enter the group open to what others can share and to learning from every other member. Key process: Check-in and closing.

POWER OF INTEGRATION

The group acknowledges all dimensions of the situation in planning their work. Each individual's unique and self-defined needs are acknowledged and integrated into the process. Everyone—not just the leader—participates in shaping how the group's work is done. The first portion of each gathering is set aside as a time for everyone to express their priorities, needs, and wishes for the gathering so that the group can integrate these as a part of the process for that gathering. Key process: check-in.

POWER OF NURTURING

The group respects each participant fully and unconditionally and regards every person as

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necessary and integral to the experience of the group. The group plans tasks, activities, and approaches to nurture the gradual growth of new skills and abilities, ensuring that every participant can be successful in reaching the goals of the group and in meeting individual needs. Critical reflection, practiced with the intention of nurturing one another's growth, becomes a powerful tool to assist one another in being successful. Key process: closing.

POWER OF DISTRIBUTION

Resources required for the work of the group (information, books, funds, space, transportation, equipment) are equally available and accessible to all members of the group. People share resources that individual members might purchase, such as books, equipment, or transportation (for example, through libraries, laboratories, resource rooms, or sharing among members), so that any individual who chooses not to use personal resources in this way—or who cannot—has equal access to the material. The group addresses issues arising from material inequalities among members openly to expose and overcome power imbalances perpetuated by economic privilege and disadvantage. Key process: rotating chair.

POWER OF INTUITION

The process that occurs and what you address in the group depend as much on the experience of the moment as on any other factor. What emerges as important for the group to address in the moment is what happens. The group lets go of what "ought" to happen to make possible what will happen. When institutional timelines or performance expectations have to be a priority but the group also has other priorities of its own, the group members weigh which priority comes first and discuss how they can still address both priorities. Key process: check-in.

POWER OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The group values ethical dimensions of the process as fundamental to the goals and purposes assigned to the group by the institution. The group considers every decision in terms of its ethical dimensions. Part of each gathering is devoted to a closing (appreciation, critical reflection, and affirmation) as a way to move to group awareness of the values represented in what is done and to consider if these are the values the group intends. Key process: closing.

POWER OF DIVERSITY

The group plans and enacts deliberate processes to integrate points of view of individuals and groups whose perspectives they do not usually address. The group deliberately includes experiences (through writings, personal encounters, poetry, song, drama, etc.) of minority groups, of different classes, of different countries, and of women. Key process: Rotating chair.

POWER OF RESPONSIBILITY

All participants assume full responsibility as the agents for their roles in the process.

Rotating conveners is one way to nurture leadership. Rotating chair ensures that everyone has a way to assume responsibility for what happens in group meetings. Each individual assumes responsibility to demystify the processes involved in all activities so that each member of the group has equal access to participating and understanding what is going on. In classrooms, grades become each individual's responsibility. Everyone shifts focus to what they are learning and accomplishing. The teacher or work-group leader has a special responsibility to help demystify the workings of the institution and to make explicit the political process within the institution. Key process: closing.

POWER OF CREATIVITY

The group actively seeks new and novel approaches. The group challenges and creatively reconceptualizes old problems. The group imagines and considers new solutions, including even the wildest possibilities. The group assesses that which can be retained and valued in current practices, and why. Song, dance, music, and other forms of art are integrated into the group's process as a way to inspire, to relieve stress, and to acknowledge the wholeness of experience. Key processes: closing and conflict transformation.

POWER OF TRUST

The group is diligent in using check-in and closing because of the value of these processes in knowing one another. Everyone speaks during these times to share personal insights and perceptions about what is happening personally and in the group. Over time, each person's integrity shines through their intentions, words, and actions, building personal knowing and trust. Key processes: check-in and closing.