Representations of Contentious History Through Art: The Collective Trauma of Guernica

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The question this study is attempting to address is how art can be used as a tool for promoting sustainable peace and the formation of a critical and accountable citizen. Such humanistic function of art is challenged in situations where society has been wounded as it often happens during and after the war. This study claims that challenges are fundamentally connected to the problem of historical narratives, especially those related to collective traumas, their use and role in shaping the views of the future generations. Narratives about the contentious past, and particularly collective traumas, are considered an important part of the cultural capital and collective identity of a society serving as a nation-building tool that unifies and glorifies the “in-group”. They can also serve to mobilize people along ethnic lines, which can lead to tensions and conflict. The aim of the study is to examine historical narratives and representations of the collective trauma of Guernica, the epicenter of the Basque identity and culture. The article concludes with an analysis of the artistic representations of collective trauma, such as the famous Picasso’s painting Guernica that has served to promote the message of peace by provoking critical thinking and accountability.

Keywords: art, education, peace, collective trauma, history, narrative

In societies plagued by conflict, the stories about war, and particularly narratives about collective traumas, permeate, both formal and informal spaces, which may lead to renewed tensions and divisions. Stories about past conflicts, referred to as historical narratives in this paper, tend to be controlled by the authorities and state since they are considered an important part of the cultural capital and collective identity of a society. They serve as a nation-building tool that unifies the “ingroup” by glorifying its actions, while excluding the “outgroup” through the silencing and omission of certain storylines whether they be fact or fiction (Korostelina, 2008; Volkan & Sinclair, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Sustainable peace is a work in progress in both peaceful and less peaceful societies, and it is defined as a condition in which all individuals can enjoy social and economic justice, reconciliation, trust, equality, prosperity, and self-actualization. Certain communities have been able to preserve their resilience to conflict through innovation and creativity, which is the focus of this paper. Innovative and artistic approaches to peacebuilding such as intercommunal painting workshops, experiential learning exercises, reflective practices, photography, poetry, improvisational theater, dance, and music, both influence people’s experience of conflict and reveal new and unique ways of addressing the challenges. Art encourages people to gain fresh perspective.
about conflict, to confront pain and loss and transform them through movement, creative expression, and embodied experience. Artistic approaches seek to increase awareness of non-verbal communication, generate fresh perspectives, and enact behavioral change in the midst of conflict, chaos, uncertainty, and rapid change. Art enables creation of “sacred spaces” that disrupt the patterns of domination, common social roles, and communication patterns within communities.

The question this paper attempts to address is how art in post conflict settings can be used as a tool for promoting sustainable peace and the formation of an informed, critical, and accountable citizen. Such humanistic function of art in situations where society has been wounded, as often happens during and after the war, is challenged. This paper claims that challenges are fundamentally connected to the problem of historical narratives, their use and role in shaping the views of the future generations. Apart from examining the structure of historical narratives and how they give meaning to the collective trauma, this article also focuses on the specific case of Guernica and the influence of its artistic representation in counteracting the toxicity of divisive historical narratives.

**Structure of Historical Narratives**

**Flexible and Cyclical Nature**

Historical narratives or stories about past conflicts are constantly in flux. Their constant fluctuation is influenced by the conditions in the present moment. They are a good indicator of current underlying problems affecting the community, such as economic uncertainty, unemployment, discord between expectations and reality, exclusion, nationalism, and structural violence (Manojlovic, 2017a). The flexible, ever-changing nature of narratives can be an important entry point for conflict transformation and for the introduction of strategies that would promote the humanistic educational goal.

To demonstrate how historical narratives affect the individual point of views and how they are influenced by the conditions in the present moment, the author has developed a visualization called the “Spiral Model of Time and Narrative”. This model is useful in examining the complexity and perpetually changing nature of historical narrative by situating it in a four-dimensional space that underlines the narrative’s relationship with time (See Figure 1).
The spiral model can be helpful in showing the function of historical narratives in connecting the past, present, and future. The narratives about past events are always connected to the speaker’s present conditions and future orientations. The cyclical construction of historical narratives takes place around the axis of time, and such a construction is fluid and in traces because the initial narrative does not fully preserve its content, but rather changes with the progression of time.

When we say that “history repeats itself”, we are only partially right. While recurrent practices, behaviors, and language constructs can certainly be traced throughout history, even the most resilient narratives change over time. The narrative contracts and widens based on the present orientations of agents. It contracts when there is less space for individual agency, openness, and curiosity, leading to the creation of a uniform, compact, and simplified narrative. Morton Deutsch suggests that destructive conflicts are characterized by their tendency to expand and escalate in terms of issues, motives, costs, negative attitudes towards adversary etc. (Deutsch,

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1 The figure represents narratives as a spiral winding around the axis of time. The model was developed by Borislava Manojlovic. Graphic design by Ross Newcomb (newcombe@gmail.com; http://www.rossnewcomb.tumblr.com/).
At the same time, “the processes involved in the intensification of conflict result in the harmful and dangerous elements driving out those which would keep the conflict within bounds” (Deutsch, 1973, p. 352). During a period of conflict, the number of adversarial events increases exponentially, while narratives and their diversity contract, thereby implying that historical time becomes denser during conflict. Voices of dissent are subdued, and individuals are drawn towards more simplified, uniform narratives.

During the time of peace, the space for narrative construction widens, as people become more open, curious, and ready to engage with the stories of others. The spiral model of narrative also shows that individual narratives are always in flux, dynamical, and adjusting to constant challenges. In such a world, time is not linear, but axes of the past, the present, and the future interact, creating a complex and dynamical system. Heine describes “the historical continuity of past and future in terms of an ever-renewable cyclicality and reversibility of time” (Heine, 1994, p. 1). It can be argued that the concept of historical continuity, in a way, emphasizes the present as an intersection of the past and the future. The present is a crucial locale for understanding the past and imagining the future.

Us Versus Them Dichotomy

Some of the key factors that seem to be cementing divisions and tensions not only within educational systems but also societies overall are the polar positions among different groups about the past. The contentious interpretations of history feed into the sectarian sense of belonging to an identity which is constructed in opposition to the identity of the relevant “Other”. The “Us versus Them” dichotomy is a key ingredient in the stories told by different (adversarial) parties about the conflict that shape their versions of reality and produce separate socio-cultural entities. Thus, one of the main challenges for sustainable peace is that different groups seek to legitimize their own views of the past and present, through which they affirm their identities and position themselves on a higher moral ground in relation to the “Other”. As a result, people start to diminish the “Other”, while glorifying themselves which in turn leads to the reemergence of tensions.

Identity threat, for example, very often arises from people’s perceptions that the collectives to which they belong are being evaluated negatively. Negative evaluation leads to the feeling of being threatened, which challenges the need of people to maintain a positive perception of their groups and collectives. Emphasize this point by arguing that group members’ identities can become salient and lead to conflict once individuals sharing a group membership perceive that their social identity is being threatened. According to Korostelina, they use defense mechanisms embedded in their mind either through socialization, or trans-generational transmission of a negative experience to cope with this perceived threat (Korostelina, 2007). Underlying the emergence of the perception of an identity threat, is the presence of opposite meaning systems that have at their core the idea of a positive, morally pure and superior “Us” and an evil, vicious, and negative “Them” (Rothbart & Korostelina, 2006). The implication this presents is that conflict arises and is perpetuated when narratives based on “Us versus Them” become so important to communities that they are central for their group identity (Smith, 2003; Wertsch, 2008).

The narrative theory of identity is helpful in examining the “Us versus Them” dichotomy as an underlying structure of stories. According to this theory, identity is not seen as a part of cognitive structures but is instead seen as an analyzable ingredient of narratives that include hidden scripts and overarching discourses about others and ourselves. These narratives are drawn from the knowledge stored in ingroup’s “cultural memory” which is “characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not” (Assmann 1973, p. 351).
& Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130). Senehi argues that, “stories create and give expression to personal and group identity by encoding a body of shared knowledge to which persons are intellectually and emotionally committed” (Senehi, 2000, p. 48). Narratives are a mixture of master collective narratives, such as stories of victimhood, aggression, domination, and unity on the one hand, and individual stories, on the other. This mixture of collective and personal narratives influences not only the development of personhood and identity of individuals, but it also regulates the relationships within the ingroup as well as with the outgroup.

According to the narrative theory of identity, identity does change and it is constantly reclaimed through narratives that bridge the horizons of past experiences and future expectations (Hall & Gay, 1996). The narrative identity approach “assumes that people act in particular ways because not to do so would fundamentally violate their sense of being at that particular time and place” (Somers, 1994, p. 624). Within this framework of analysis, people’s identities cannot be understood unless situated in a historical period, place, and set of relationships. Moreover, an individual sense of “Self” cannot exist without the presence of “Others”. We need the relationship with the “Other” to make sense of ourselves and to open to the possibilities of life, freedom and the inevitability of living in a community of similar, yet different individuals. We should not assume that we can a priori apply theories that would help us examine human behavior or identity in a certain context and time, nor should we impose preconceived categories on people’s views and behaviors to explain them. Instead, we need to be humble, curious, and willing to explore the realities that exist on the ground with an open mind and sensitivity for the dynamics of identity in its historical context.

In addition to the narrative theory of identity, the contact theory provides insights into the ways groups position each other and how their identities are shaped through the separation of “Us” and “Them”. The findings of the contact theory, particularly in its early days, suggest that contact improves relations under the conditions of equal status, common goals, acquaintance potential, and the support of authorities among groups that are experiencing or had experienced conflict (Allport, 1979). These optimal conditions rarely exist, where asymmetrical power relations between conflicting groups, lack of support and adequate initiatives from the government as well as differing goals represent factors that persistently fuel divisions. Additionally, increased contact through educational integration may be counterproductive and a threat to minority identity (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Hence, critics of the contact theory posit that it is not contact, but rather the quality of engagement between the two groups that matters. The quality of engagement and interaction cannot be understood by only looking at the interaction within different educational systems, but also by considering the wider communities and contexts in which students find themselves embedded. The influence of divided communities on patterns of interaction among youth was previously identified and studied in various post-conflict contexts, most notably in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine. For example, Gallagher points out that wider communal divisions and social inequity are some of the major contributors to segregation among youth in Northern Ireland (Gallagher, 2004).

The problem with narratives in post-conflict settings is that they are troublingly divisive, but at the same time they are essential for the collective and individual’s view of reality. They acquire great potency in educational systems, in which the politics of memory and history have very concrete goals and a significant impact on how the new generations perceive conflict. The takeaway point of this section is that educators and practitioners interested in conflict resolution and peacebuilding need to advocate for an awareness of the workings of contentious stories or, more accurately, historical narratives in shaping identities, perceptions, and
behaviors. In the spirit of progressive humanism, this article posits that raising consciousness and educating about the uses of contentious past may be one of the key ways for tackling conflict and sustaining peace.

The Collective Trauma

The most compelling cases through which to study the uses of historical narratives are collective traumas. Collective traumas are based on traumatic events that have left a lasting mark on the collective consciousness of a group of people. The stories about major atrocities, victories, defeats, bombings are mythologized and framed to invoke national unity, solidarity, emotions, sense of victimhood and call for justice and reparation. By constructing collective traumas, groups identify the shared source of suffering, and adopt moral responsibility and solidarity with the members of the ingroup. At the same time groups tend not to recognize the suffering of the others, which leads to the continuation of divisions and conflict.

While socio-psychological and psychoanalytic theories view collective traumas as an integral part of human mind and consciousness which re-emerge due to their unassimilated nature, this paper is influenced by constructivist theory of collective trauma (Volkan & Sinclair, 1998; Caruth, 2014). Constructivist theory posits that past events do not, in themselves, create collective trauma. Rather trauma is socially constructed through narratives, symbols, art, history textbooks, memorials, media, oral transmission etc. We are re-experiencing trauma through different representations of the event to come to terms with the pain and to figure out ways of survival and continuation (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004). The concern is not with the accuracy of the claims; rather the focus is on how the claims are made and their impacts. When collective traumas happen, group’s views about its identity are challenged and compromised. The new representations of traumatic events become crucial for re-inventing solidarity, self-esteem, and unity within ingroups. Representations of a collective traumatic event change over time depending on the context in the process of reinventing group’s identity.

In public and private spaces, a contentious history can be very much alive and persist in being a heated topic through reminders such as textbooks, commemorations, media announcements, and cetera. The trauma remains active via the shared narrative of past victimization, which is often founded on misrepresentations of a large group’s perceptions. Such narrative leads group members to view the descendants of their ancestors’ perpetrators and/or enemies as their extensions (Volkan & Sinclair, 1998). There is also a feeling of humiliation and sense of loss that accompanies the past victims’ shame, which serves as a bonding mechanism, transmitted from generation to generation, linking generationally different members of the same group across time (Jones, 2004). However, it is not only shame that bonds the members of a group with one another, but it is a perceived threat and fear based on the collective experience of trauma. Narratives of victimhood based on past atrocities serve to parties as justifications for the perpetuation of hostilities and as evidence for the legitimacy of their grievances.

In the next section, the author examines the case of Guernica analyzing the impact of its representation through art.

The Case of Guernica

The bombing of Guernica, its famous artistic representation and historical narratives surrounding the traumatic event are examined more closely using the Four Dimensions of Representation analytical framework proposed by Jeffrey Alexander. The author will look at: (1) the nature of pain (what happened—causes and
conditions); (2) the nature of victim (what group was affected, why Basque town?); (3) relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience (is Basque trauma, global trauma too?); (4) institutional arenas (how is trauma mediated through by different institutional arenas? Is art the appropriate format?) (Alexander et al., 2004).

The Nature of Pain and Victim

Guernica is a town in the province of Biscay in the Basque Country, Spain. It is a small town of 16,000 people, but it has a major significance for the Basques. Guernica has been historically the seat of the parliament of the province of Biscay and the meeting place of the traditional Biscayan assembly. Its oak tree, known as the Gernikako Arbola, became the symbol of traditional rights of the Basque people to freedom and autonomy. Even Spanish kings swore to respect the Biscayan liberties under the Guernica tree, and the modern Lehendakari (President of the Basque Country) swears his oath there. During the Spanish Civil War, it was regarded as the center of the republican resistance movement, which General Franco wanted to squash. With his German allies, Franco orchestrated one of the first aerial bombings by Nazi Germany in the wake of WWII. This was the first time in modern warfare that the civilians and cultural heritage became primary targets. On April 26, 1937, warplanes of the German Condor Legion, commanded by Colonel Wolfram von Richthofen, bombed Guernica for about two hours. It was a market day so many people were outside. Because many of the town’s men were away, engaged in fighting on behalf of the republicans, the town at the time of the bombing was populated mostly by women and children who became the primary targets. The estimates of number of civilian casualties ranges between 300 and 1,700 people and these numbers are still a matter of dispute.

Is Basque Trauma, Global Trauma Too?

This section examines the most famous representation of the Guernica bombing, the attendant narratives and its symbolic impact. Although Picasso did not want his art to be used for political purposes, and he clearly said, “I will never make art with the preconceived idea of serving the interests of the political, religious or military elites of a country”, the bombing of Guernica inspired one of his most famous paintings. Collective memory does not only exist in the individuals, but it is also located in cultural artifacts. Analyzing the contents of cultural artifacts, such as Guernica painting, one may see how the collective trauma has been symbolically reconstructed and how it has become meaningful not only for the Basques, but globally. The painting became a global symbol of protest war and struggle for protection of innocent lives. Guernica changed the way people viewed the war and the conflict parties. It was the first time that innocent civilians were the sole target which later became the norm.

Although Picasso argued that the bull is a bull and the horse is a horse... in his famous painting, there is an apparent symbolism. Guernica, in Picasso’s mind’s eye, became a theatre of pain on the day of bombing just as corrida served as a theatre of pain in everyday Spain. The horse became a symbol of the innocent people killed in bombing as horses often fall victim in corrida. The bull represented darkness and aggression of fascism, the aggression that had to be stopped. The woman represented a universal image of a mother unable to protect her children from the horrors of war. The light bulb suggested the dark side of progress that created a more sophisticated tool of destruction etc. As with any great piece of art, interpretations have been diverse and multifaceted.

Few decades after its creation, we can say with some certainty that the painting outgrew its original stature and became a collective image that people suffering in conflict can identify with. The representation of collective trauma through art shows the power of symbolic and allegoric expression in illuminating deeper and
universal knowledge of humanity, knowledge that war is fundamentally evil and that there must be better ways of dealing with differences and conflict.

**Institutional Arenas and Different Narratives**

The politics of institutional arenas are explored by looking at the location in which the artifact has been exhibited as well as the formats of representation such as painting, tapestry, or sculpture. The Guernica painting was first exhibited at the 1937 Paris International exhibition within the Spanish Pavilion, directly across from the German Pavilion. The German guidebook at the Paris Exhibition described Guernica as “…the dream of a madman, a hodgepodge of parts of bodies that a four-year-old child could have painted”. Not only had the subject of Picasso’s painting became problematic but also its cubist style. Cubists and other modern artists were prosecuted, and their works have been sold or destroyed by Nazi Germany in which romantic realism became the state sanctioned form of art.

Artistic representations of collective traumas can also be problematic as they can be perceived to diminish the experience of the victims. Theodor Adorno argues that “after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry” (Adorno, 2003, p. 162). The concern reflected in Adorno’s idea is that the Holocaust is an event that cannot be understood and transmitted through artistic means. Art cannot emulate the reality of the events because the reality is beyond comprehension countering all previous conventions and beliefs of humanity. Problem with artistic representations of collective traumas is that they cannot truly represent the magnitude and horror of such events.

On the other hand, the outrageous aspect of evil lies in the fact that evil is easily accessible and common. It can happen anywhere, and perpetrators of evil are not “monsters” but average people. It is “the banality of evil”, as Arendt would put it, that is difficult to accept, the unexplainable scale of destruction and involvement of substantial number of perpetrators willing to do atrocious things. In that sense, the cubist vision of distorted black-and-white reality becomes a perfect representation of an atrocity in which people, animals, and architecture play grotesque roles in the theatre of chaos and war.

General Franco and his fascist faction won the Spanish Civil War and he ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975. During Franco’s rule Guernica was on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York because Picasso did not want the painting to be in Franco’s Spain. The painting was returned to Spain in 1981 and today it resides in Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. A tapestry copy of Picasso’s Guernica is displayed on the wall of the United Nations building in New York City, at the entrance to the Security Council room. It was notoriously covered when Colin Powell announced the US intervention and bombing of Iraq.

The painting itself spurred anti-war activism from the time it was painted. From 1939, when it toured, European capitals promoting the anti-fascist cause to becoming a symbol of protest against the Vietnam War. The narrative that was developed around the painting integrated its visual and symbolic meaning into universal and mythological collective reservoir through which the painting became a representation of human search for peace, dignity, and freedom. Picasso helped us to understand and respond to trauma on a deeper, emotional level. Picasso was able to combine images of suffering and death with the political statement and empathy with human pain felt universally. This ability of art to incorporate multiple narratives, feelings, and meanings is what made this painting a universal symbol of protesting the war that speaks through decades to people from all over the world. The art can be seen as an innovative tool for teaching contentious and divisive history. Its universality and symbolism provokes discussion, dialogue, and different interpretations, which can help people move from their entrenched positions and challenge their uniform one-sided interpretations in a creative way.
The Role of Art in Educating New Generations About Collective Traumas

When educating about contentious past and collective traumas, the focus should not only be on the content of the stories, but also on the dynamics of how those stories are told, how they are interpreted, and who is telling them. If we take the example of the historical narratives being taught in history classes, it is evident that the new generations that do not have an actual memory of the conflict are socialized into certain culturally accepted frameworks of thinking and acting that are fundamentally prejudicial and one-sided. Therefore, it is important that students are given tools for critical thinking which would enable them to become aware of the prejudice and flaws within historical narratives.

Art is an educational tool as it is politically and socially engaged addressing socio-political issues through symbols and metaphors which speak to our collective consciousness. Art provokes independent thinking and enables students’ emergence as autonomous spiritual beings, as beings capable of innovation and critical thinking, which can make them agents for peace and progress. According to Montessori, children need to learn and understand the roots of the conflicts, which are often located in the traditional forms of education (Bogen, n.d.). She calls those traditional forms control-model education: “The child who has never learned to act alone, to direct his own actions, to govern his own will, grows into an adult who is easily led and must always lean upon others” (Montessori, 1943, p. 23). Montessori suggests that blind obedience leads to everything that is wrong and evil in our society. It enables ignorance, bias, and non-informed responses to different situations, brings about the seduction of the masses by demagogues, and leads people to blindly follow authority figures without questioning their words and actions.

Through its symbolism, story-telling, film, role-playing, acting, dancing and painting, art has the potential to send a strong social and political message. Art can be seen as communicative action, a type of social action geared towards communication and understanding between individuals that can have a lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory force (Habermas, 1985). Furthermore, art can be used to promote democratic and humanistic values in societies shattered by conflict by disrupting and reconfiguring roles, places, and patterns of communications within a community (McDonnell, 2014). It can put one in other’s shoes, bring people together through stories and narratives, enable catharsis and dealing with the pain, and eventually help societies imagine a peaceful future.

Guernica painting, discussed in this paper, has proven to be a useful tool in the promotion of peace activism as it has enabled the space for expressing alternative views, empathy, and critical thinking. It juxtaposes destruction to creativity to draw the attention to the futility and senselessness of war. Painting as well as other art forms can encourage reflexive processes and critical engagement with plurality and difference. They provide a wide canvas that has been used to convey a universal message about the values of social justice, cosmopolitanism, and interconnectivity, which are all characteristics of peaceful societies.

In societies dealing with a contentious past, people may share a common historical experience, but have completely different interpretations of what happened. The awareness that there is often a disconnect between the history taught at home and the history taught in school speaks to the need for the use of art in representing contentious history. How new generations understand the history of their country, particularly the most contentious aspects of its history, may have far reaching implications for the future escalation of violence.

Art can be used to promote democratic and humanistic values in societies shattered by conflict by disrupting and reconfiguring roles, places, and patterns of communications within a community (McDonnell,
When art does this in a way that disrupts and displaces a distribution based on a “natural” logic of inequality, it shares a common logic and purpose with democracy, and when taken up by politics, art can contribute to democracy being enacted (McDonnell, 2014, p. 51).

Given that individuals in conflict are constrained by their thoughts and actions which can lead to a breakdown in communication, the role of emotions should be taken into account in education for peace. Advancing peace in deeply divided societies cannot be achieved through rational processes alone (Cohen, 2005). The arts and expressive culture have the unique capability to invite us into aesthetic experiences that link our cognitive, sensory, and emotional faculties together, opening us up to envisioning new possibilities for the future in post-conflict periods precisely when there is a strong desire for affiliation and the survival of the group in non-conscious realms of the human mind. Arts can re-humanize the self and the other; facilitate the listening to and telling of stories and the creation of more nuanced narratives and understanding of identity; help mourn losses; strengthen empathy for the suffering of others; help acknowledge and address injustice; support the process of overcoming bitterness; and help envision a better future of social reconstruction (Cohen, 2005).

Whether we talk about schools, museums, clubs, community centers, places of worship or online spaces, learning becomes active and operative only through interaction with others. Such interaction has certain rules and within such context mediators need to agree on guidelines as well as on who would introduce meaning and lead the process of sense making. Learning can no longer be a linear, direct, and automatic outcome of teaching or reading textbooks. Instead, we need to pay close attention to the mediating effects of students’ prior knowledge, sources of information, beliefs, values, and biases as well as the role that teachers, parents, peers, and other educators play as key mediators of meaning that induce disconnects in learning about the contentious past. By pointing out and highlighting the disconnects, new generations are then able to use their own critical thinking to dig deeper into the subject matter and look for evidence.

In analyzing the importance of mediators of meaning as agents of change, it is apparent that there is a gap in understanding the role of parents and teachers in students’ learning. History is not limited to what exists in books, or on TV, or the Internet, which are typically considered key sources of knowledge about culture and history for today’s youth. Unless young people engage in discussing, verbalizing, and understanding topics such as conflict with their parents at home, they cannot become a living history and they cannot be acquired as a part of their internalized system of values and beliefs. One of the key assumptions of this article is that the key mediators of meanings, especially in fragile and post-conflict societies, are parents and teachers because it is with them that youth engage in making sense of their own identities by learning about the past and envisioning the future.

The rise of technology has enabled communication to become much faster and has allowed for increased access to an infinite number of sources that simultaneously facilitate and fragment relational and communicative processes. As a result, there has been a proliferation of conflicting meanings as youth use the Internet as their primary source of knowledge. While the Internet provides an enormous amount of information that has opened the door for conflictual meanings to emerge, these meanings do not necessarily lead students to adopt certain fixed positions. What seem to be significant are the processes of verifying and acquiring certain meanings through interaction with mediators of meanings such as parents and teachers. To appropriate certain narratives, young people need to confirm their content through their family, school, and community. The confirmation of narratives does not have to be intentional, rather it is randomly negotiated through various interactions that individuals have that they are usually not even aware of it.
Providing a space for growth which is creative and art-oriented is essential because critical thinking is often lost in the limbo of teachers avoiding or not having the proper tools to discuss difficult topics, and parents’ unwillingness to discuss contentious topics out of fear that it will impact their children’s socialization. The problem is worsened by youth’s constant exposure to contentious topics through different forms of media, popular culture, and public discourses and because of this they may see the past as something that pollutes their present. However, rejecting or avoiding discussion on the contentious past does not isolate youth from narratives that are responsible for perpetuating divisions in their respective societies. Therefore, it is clear that, to cope with various ideologically motivated versions of the past, young people need to be able to analyze and critically assess them, which empowers them to become more curious, open minded, and thoughtful. Art can provoke critical thinking, and artistic approaches to historical narratives can be an important tool in fostering openness, respect, and trust. Picasso’s Guernica sends a clear message to the whole humanity against war, violence, and pointless suffering. It brings the human family together around a single powerful anti-war idea.

Conclusion

The arts have had a strong track-record in addressing key issues such as victimhood, pain, politics, and hierarchical paradigms which reinforce prejudice and stereotyping. The arts encourage reflexive processes and critical engagement with plurality and difference. Diverse learners are enabled to reflect on their own and others’ experiences in an inclusive and cohesive manner. Promoting awareness of universal interdependence of humanity within young people whose everyday experiences may be fraught with divisions and conflict is key to fostering wider understanding about the importance of sustainable peace.

Changes in the conflict system can be introduced through creative approaches that foster values of humility, trust, and empathy and views of one’s identity as equally relevant as the identity of any other group or individual. Such humanistic values can gain traction and can be fostered relationally and collaboratively as exemplified in initiatives that utilize art.

In conclusion, the author would like to refer to Freire’s idea that learning occurs through relationship and socialization (Freire, 1970). To liberate communities locked in an “Us versus Them” way of thinking is to empower them to think collaboratively and responsibly. People can see through false and/or biased information and change their perceptions as they learn from, understand, and care for the “Other”. Peacebuilding can only happen through a relationship and it requires a long-term commitment to learning together.

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