

Lehner, Daniela

Learning to unlearn. Pluriversality and arts-based pedagogies in peace education

International journal for research in cultural, aesthetic, and arts education 2 (2026) 1, S. 27-43



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Lehner, Daniela: Learning to unlearn. Pluriversality and arts-based pedagogies in peace education - In: International journal for research in cultural, aesthetic, and arts education 2 (2026) 1, S. 27-43 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-354201 - DOI: 10.25656/01:35420; 10.31244/IJRCAAE.2026.01.03

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-354201>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:35420>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



WAXMANN
www.waxmann.com

<http://www.waxmann.com>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt unter folgenden Bedingungen vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen: Sie müssen den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen. Dieses Werk bzw. der Inhalt darf nicht für kommerzielle Zwecke verwendet werden. Die neu entstandenen Werke bzw. Inhalte dürfen nur unter Verwendung von Lizenzbedingungen weitergegeben werden, die mit denen dieses Lizenzvertrages identisch oder vergleichbar sind.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and transmit, adapt or exhibit the work in the public and alter, transform or change this work as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor. You are not allowed to make commercial use of the work. If you alter, transform, or change this work in any way, you may distribute the resulting work only under this or a comparable license.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS

DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation

Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung

E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de

Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

DANIELA LEHNER

Learning to Unlearn

Pluriversality and Arts-based Pedagogies in Peace Education

1. Introduction

I am writing this text because it seems that the complexities of our current era are ever-growing. I sense that our societal, ecological, and economic challenges are intensifying, necessitating diverse approaches to knowledge and existence, augmented by commitments of the heart, mind, and will, as we confront the multifaceted issues prevalent in our societies, such as inequality, climate change, racism, poverty, and mental health concerns (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021). The world is increasingly seen as interconnected; however, it is simultaneously becoming more divided and unequal. We currently appear to be in the midst of a crisis defined by colonial modernity, characterized by patterns of knowledge and existence that foster division and violence. Such hierarchical and divisive structures do not support the sustenance of life for either the present world or future generations. Modernity, while replete with contradictions, is a condition from which we cannot completely disentangle ourselves. It is imperative that we persistently scrutinize the dominant discourses to prevent the perpetuation of modern/colonial tendencies and to commence the process of unlearning these violent dichotomies (Akomolafe, 2017; Andreotti, 2021).

With dichotomies I refer particularly to the dichotomies of mind and body, the societal stratification based on race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability, as well as the cleavage between scientific rationale and the material and spiritual realms, and between society and nature, as well as the construction of disembodied and decontextualized knowledge practices that make universal truth claims. Drawing from my experiences as a teacher and participant in embodied and arts-based methods, I recognize the potential to dismantle our habitual linear and rational patterns and to engage with embodied and sensory experiences that cultivate new perceptions

Dr. Daniela Lehner, Alpen-Adria-Universität Graz, Austria

E-Mail: daniela.lehner@uni-graz.at, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1965-6291>

and methods of existence, action, and understanding. I am interested in delving into this potential through both theoretical and practical lenses (as a teacher and participant), utilizing an autoethnographic stance.

In the first part, I provide a theoretical reflection on pluriversality concerning peace, peace education, and the arts. In the second part, I engage with pedagogies and spaces for possible unlearning. Thirdly, I describe possible unlearning through arts-based approaches (Photovoice, Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed, and Social Presencing Theatre), drawing on personal experiences and personal agency as both a teacher and participant.

2. Pluriversal Reflections on Peace, Peace Education and Arts-based Approaches

In attempting to define peace and peace education, I encounter significant challenges. Peace is often connected to specific images – “a soaring dove, children holding hands around a globe, sunset over a calm sea” (Hawksley & Mitchell, 2020, p. 2), yet it can feel like a distant reality where violence is absent. Peace seems like an unknown place where violence does not happen. In everyday discourse, peace is often negatively defined as the absence of war and viewed as either a temporary interlude between conflicts or an unattainable ideal (Wenders & Zournazi, 2013). Moreover, the modern/liberal understanding of peace is very challenging considering its entanglement with issues of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Krohn & Pauls, 2023). The liberal peace model, described by Richmond (2005) as a universal, neo-colonial approach applied in post-conflict state-building and free market implementations, advocates for the establishment of peace through state mechanisms, including good governance, free markets, law enforcement institutions, and human rights advocacy (Richmond, 2005; Horner, 2013).

However, Krohn and Pauls (2023) argue, building on the work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Ramón Grosfoguel (2012), that there is an ontological and epistemological level of violence that often remains unrecognized within modern/liberal narratives of peace. The modern/liberal conceptualizations of peace privileges those within a particular “zone of being,” a privilege typically associated with whiteness, constituting a form of ontological and epistemological violence based on the hierarchical classification of people along the lines of zones of being and non-being (Krohn & Pauls, 2023, p. 17).

Wars within the modern/colonial world system are viewed as integral elements of modernity, closely linked with European colonialism and imperialism. Walter D. Mignolo (2011) describes war as part of the colonial power matrix, including the imposition of Western values and systems on others, which often leads to exploitation and oppression that maintain geopolitical and economic structures favourable to Western

interests. This pattern of war endorses a “master morality” of domination and control, justifying racial policies, imperial conquests, and violence. This paradigm is pivotal for colonial modernity to maintain power and continual systems of oppression and inequality as well as the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems and ways of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2008). Within peace education, it is crucial to recognize and understand these modern/colonial ontologies and epistemologies, including their binary, linear, and dualistic hierarchies. These premises still underpin educational institutions, underscoring the importance of unlearning such violent structures (Spivak, 1995; Spivak, 2004; Andreotti, 2011; Zembylas, 2018).

A pluriversal understanding of peace questions modernity’s universalism, hierarchies and dualisms and focuses on the interconnectivity and relationality of all living beings. The pluriverse recognizes multiple worlds and ontologies and critically examines the universality of modernity, including a particular individualized and separatist mode of being in the world (Escobar, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Escobar, 2018; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Mignolo, 2018; Escobar, 2020). Pluriversality emerged from decolonial theory and challenges normative Eurocentric practices that sustain inequality and violence or erase other modes of being and knowing (Perry, 2020, pp. 293–294). “Pluriversality provides an alternative conceptual frame to work relationally in a globalized world that shares a multiplicity of ontologies and sense-making frameworks” (Perry, 2020, p. 299). It means the decolonization of knowledge and the deconstruction of dominant violent epistemes based on modernity’s universality (Zembylas, 2017; Escobar, 2020; Williams & Bermeo, 2020). A pluriversal understanding of peace would mean to make visible the many peaces (Dietrich & Sützl, 1997; Koppensteiner, 2018) that exist, realize the imperfectness of peace (Muñoz, 2006) and focus on the decolonialization of peace (Fontan, 2012; Williams & Bermeo, 2020; Krohn & Pauls, 2023). The framework of the ‘many peaces’ relates to a multiplicity of small, specific, often competing and contradictory lived peaces. It provides an understanding of peace in a pluralistic and inclusive manner. Rather than viewing peace as a singular, universal concept, it recognizes the existence of multiple, context-dependent interpretations of peace that vary across different cultures, societies and contexts, each has its own unique understanding and manifestations (Dietrich & Sützl, 1997; Dietrich, 2012). The many peaces include the idea of transrational peace which integrates the modern focus on reason but is enriched with postmodern knowledge and energetic teaching about peace. The aim is a holistic perspective that differentiates between various understandings of peace while simultaneously integrating them. The crucial aspect is, again, relationality, which involves the *Mitwelt*¹ society and the wider cosmos, goes

¹ *Mitwelt* is a German word that translates in with-world and highlights the human embeddedness in nature.

beyond the anthropocentric and recognizes a connection to a greater whole (Koppensteiner, 2018, pp. 40–41).

These understandings collectively acknowledge that peace is subjective, relational, dynamic, processual, and continually evolving, and they recognize that peace is immersed in power dynamics. Rather than being a static occurrence or an unattainable goal, peace is an active, day-to-day commitment deeply rooted in local experiences and community knowledge. Krohn and Pauls (2023) describe peace as an integral element of daily living, not an abstract, transcendent or ideal state. Similarly, Muñoz (2006) characterizes peace as ‘imperfect,’ emphasizing the ongoing, incomplete nature of daily peace processes that constitute the primary substance of human life. Such a notion of peace underlines the shared, contentious, and negotiable aspects of our peaceful interactions and emphasizes intersubjective, conflictive, and debatable experiences of peace (Muñoz, 2006; Koppensteiner, 2018). Local experiences and community wisdom are foundational to peacebuilding, yet these local peace endeavours are frequently disregarded (Anderson, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2021). Contrasting with liberal and universalist conceptions, pluriversal reflections on peace contest mechanical interpretations and instead illuminate the interconnectedness and interrelationships among all forms of life. This extends to include not only human needs but also ‘more-than-human needs,’ encompassing the needs and welfare of non-human entities like animals, plants, ecosystems, and other components of the natural world. David Abram (1996) argues for a more profound ecological consciousness that acknowledges the inherent value of all life forms and ecosystems, an approach that is vital for confronting environmental issues and fostering modes of existence that respect the interconnected web of life.

As a peace educator, I find it essential to devote time to studying the various conceptions of peace, to detach peace from its definitions rooted in absence, and to begin cultivating imaginaries and visions of what a peaceful coexistence might entail. Wim Wenders and Mary Zournazi (2013) have observed that although we frequently recognize violence and injustice within our world, peace is less visible to us.

“[...] we are considering how the sacred is the bridge between the worlds of violence and the worlds of peace. There is a difference between theological imperialism and the sacred as a reckoning that challenges our cultural habits. This reckoning evolves through stories, images and perceptions that can encourage different ways of seeing the world and different ways of understanding peace [...]. The everyday and the holy involve a care toward the future, this care involves an ethics that is founded in the relations between the infinite and the everyday.” (Wenders & Zournazi, 2013, p. 4)

Additionally, Wenders and Zournazi (2013) emphasize the importance of creativity and the use of arts-based methods to create visions and imaginaries of peace. Peace education and peace work require creativity and the arts to envision and understand the numerous worlds that co-exist (Prentki, 2015; Jalka, 2018). Arts-based approach-

es have been documented as powerful tools for transforming conflict and confronting difficult issues. The dialogical nature of the performing arts provides a safe space for experimentation without negative consequences, making it a particularly effective method for practicing peace and resolving conflicts (Cohen & Walker, 2011). Performing arts also facilitate new forms of understanding that go beyond verbal communication, allowing for the embodiment of knowledge that might not yet be present in our consciousness. Acting out narratives before an audience also alters one's physical experience (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009). Through the performing arts, we can engage with imagined realities, which can serve as rehearsals for shaping actuality (Carter & Benza Guerra, 2022). Performances offer a medium to critique social realities, stimulate debate, and bring issues into public discourse (Prentki & Breed). Sometimes the biggest challenge is to recognize that the body can be a territory of peace. Given that peace and violence are experienced through the body, incorporating arts-based and somatic practices in peace education is crucial. Acknowledging the body as a potential haven of peace can be a significant challenge in this field (Ávila, 2021; Carter & Benza Guerra, 2022).

Decolonial and feminist authors emphasize the potential of the body in art and artistic strategies to challenge dualistic and hierarchical thinking, thereby fostering more interconnected and pluriversal perspectives that question established truths and power dynamics. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist and artist, harnesses artistic strategies and *autohistoria-teoría* (self-narrative-theory making) to underscore the simultaneity of multiple ways of knowing and being, using the Aztec term *nepantla* to describe a liminal state or space in between different worlds. Anzaldúa navigates the space of *nepantla*, the location of cultural disruption, fracture, and reconstruction, where she and other Chicana artists blend and create a new cultural synthesis, a *mestizada*² (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 47). Through poetry and her illustrations, she stresses the significance of recognizing and valuing, and imagining a variety of knowledge and existence, often those marginalized by prevailing cultural narratives. In line with this perspective, she emphasizes that her task as an artist lies in witnessing what troubles and unsettles us, stepping back to discern the underlying patterns in both personal and collective experiences, and envisioning ways in which we might repair *el daño* (the damage) through imagination and its visions. She affirms her belief in the transformative power and healing capacity of art (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 10).

Anzaldúa views her stories as performances manifested each time they are vocally shared or read in silence (Anzaldúa, 1978, p. 67). In performative processes, the inte-

² *Mestizada* is a term Anzaldúa uses to describe the state of being that goes beyond mere racial or cultural mixing. It encompasses a broader sense of identity that includes the blending and integration of diverse cultural, spiritual, and psychological elements. It reflects her exploration of the complex and hybrid identities that emerge at the borders – both literal and metaphorical – of different cultures, languages, and identities.

gration of different non-verbal forms of knowledge, as well as process-oriented action knowledge, generates a knowing in performing; a knowledge that is generated in the process. As described in transformative learning theories, processes in which bodily/physical, emotional, intuitive and imaginative levels of being human are stimulated are more profound (Fisher-Yoshida, 2009, p. 6; Formenti & West, 2018). In Anzaldúa's last writings she articulated a relationship with images as talking with images and not about them and images that serve as conduits between emotion and deliberate cognition (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 5).

Anzaldúa conceives of the spiritual, material, physical, and psychic as indistinguishable components of a cohesive and immensely intricate reality. For her, narratives, trees, metaphors, and her own essays all possess a type of being, and agency that are partially or otherwise beyond human comprehension and control. Anzaldúa's work is grounded in an array of epistemologies, including indigenous Mexican traditions, as well as her own somatic and theoretical insights. Writing from the geographical and metaphorical borderlands of Southern Texas, she employs in-betweenness to oppose binary and hierarchical concepts like the distinction between body and mind, humans and nature, and different cultures and nations.

"A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts – writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism – both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself." (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 119)

Her aim is to disrupt dominant modes of knowledge production rooted in modern/colonial systems through an embodied approach to storytelling, illuminating the interconnectivity and complex relationships shared by all beings (Anzaldúa, 1978; 2015). To learn interconnectivity, we must unlearn the modern/colonial ways of being in the world as described above. To facilitate these shifts, it is important to offer pedagogies and spaces that can support this process.

3. Pedagogies and Spaces for Possible Unlearning

Pedagogies and spaces for possible unlearning need to allow students to transition from their everyday reality into a place of deep learning. Deep learning involves a fundamental change in the way individuals perceive and understand their world. It is not just about adding new information but transforming one's existing knowledge and worldview. Deep learning emphasizes the holistic interconnectedness of knowledge, the importance of relationships in the learning process, and the critical reflection of knowledge (Yorks & Kasl, 2006, p. 51). For these learning processes, it is crucial for educators or facilitators to create safe and brave spaces that challenge students and help them learn. A safe space is an environment where students feel safe to express

themselves, free from judgment or discrimination. A safe space is crucial for people to feel trust and display openness. A brave space is a space where students feel encouraged to express themselves, even if that means leaving their comfort zone. A brave space is a space where students feel ready to take risks and make mistakes (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Palfrey, 2017; Krohn & Pauls, 2023). If we teachers and educators feel safe and brave enough to come out as vulnerable and imperfect human beings, then we have a chance of creating that space for our students (Brantmeier, 2013; Tjersland, 2022). “Vulnerability is a process and quality that centres around the courageous daring to – as ‘simple’ as it sounds yet with the multiple imperfections it involves – show up as, nothing more and nothing less, human” (Tjersland, 2022, p. 77). If we reveal ourselves to be three-dimensional beings – human with a specific story, feelings, and needs – students might feel encouraged to do the same. These spaces of trust are places where deep, transformative learning can occur (Formenti & West, 2018; Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020); learning that affects one’s own biography and lifeworld – a dynamic of inner and outer worlds – rather than learning as acquisition. This is crucial for peace education because it means learning to be human (Illeris, 2014). That is what Yorks and Kasl (2006) describe as expressive ways of knowing:

“Expressive ways of knowing provide pathways among individuals by giving individuals more ready access to the experiential knowing of the other, thus bringing learners into an empathic connection for learning-within-relationship. The pathway between critical discourse and the field of empathic connection deepens a group’s capacity to engage one another’s worldviews at profound levels of mutual respect, trust, and authentic understanding.” (Yorks & Kasl, 2006, p. 61)

Yet within higher education and its hierarchical structures, power imbalances, dependencies, credits and gradings, it can be very challenging to create these meaningful spaces. Educational institutions in particular reinforce the reproduction of social hierarchies, power relations and Eurocentric curricula. From my experiences of using arts-based and embodied teaching approaches within higher education, it is important to be aware of hierarchical power imbalances while at the same time trying to create a horizontal learning setting. In order to break through relations of dominance, the relationship between teachers and learners must also be questioned and generated anew. The idea that a teacher’s worldviews, which have emerged in a specifically shaped educational context, should simply be transferred to learners as objects (instead of subjects with individual experiences) must be questioned, especially in light of reflections on decolonial education and epistemic violence. Classical learning must be unlearned by encouraging students to emancipate themselves from teachers and to generate new ideas of learning in a space of intellectual equality (Varela, 2007; Varela, 2018).

Furthermore, a horizontal learning setting promotes openness and gives people the trust they need to share their stories and vulnerabilities (Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020). To cultivate peaceful coexistence, horizontal interactions and shared power are

crucial values (Eisler & Miller, 2004). Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1990) pedagogy of the oppressed, bell hooks highlights the importance of horizontal learning when it comes to creating an atmosphere of care, solidarity and trust within the classroom (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2003). Hanne Tjersland (2022) gives an example of her own theatre work as an elicitive, collaborative, relational and vulnerable process of teaching that comes from a place of not fully knowing what the end results might be. She describes the co-creation of knowledge as imperfect learning for peace and uses an elicitive approach that was developed by John Paul Lederach (1995). Elicitive means providing spaces and processes to let resources unfold instead of imposing solutions from above. Arts-based approaches and especially theatre work can be spaces where everything that occurs is an invitation and where learning is a co-creation (Dietrich, 2013; Koppensteiner, 2020; Bishop & Etmanski, 2021; Tjersland, 2022). Theatre is a social art that allows us to explore various experiences and worlds together even though they are different from one's own (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). From my own experiences especially during Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed new ideas and perspectives can arise from the group if students have the chance to participate, even without fully knowing what will happen. I have seen and heard about students jumping into a scene out of the audience and changing a role, then themselves being surprised at how they acted on the stage. It is precisely such moments that enable students to learn about themselves and social relationships relating to peace and violence, including their behaviour and strategies during conflict. Arts-based teaching is in some ways unpredictable because it is shaped by current social forces, with the capacity to engage us on various levels.

“Their ability to tap into and awaken our deepest fears and desires in ways that can, for better or worse, bypass our normal and more reflective ways of thinking and acting, serves to illustrate the degree to which our image of ourselves as self-possessed and rational is only partially accurate.” (Hawksley & Mitchell, 2020, p. 11)

Arts-based approaches hold the potential for unlearning mechanistic patterns or questioning one's own social positioning and privilege. Unlearning also means the practice of rule-breaking and resistance as an ethical obligation to question unequal and violent structures and the disciplinary measures embedded in it (Varela, 2007).

4. Exploring Possible Unlearning in Practice

In this section I explore and provide possible examples of unlearning in practice through my experiences as a teacher of peace education and as a participant of art-based methods myself. I introduce the Photovoice Method, Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed and Social Presencing Theater. Using an autoethnographic inspired approach might also be a way of unlearning the separation of the personal and the collective as well as the personal and the theoretical. Julie Choi (2017) describes how autoethnography can be used as a methodological tool to explore and represent the

multiplicity of voices and identities within individuals, particularly in the context of language learning and teaching. Carolyn Ellis (2004) introduces autoethnography as a way for researchers to reflect on their own lives in relation to the wider social contexts they inhabit. She also demonstrates how researchers can use their own experiences as a basis for scholarly inquiry to provide insights into lived experiences. I will draw upon my personal experiences as both a teacher and participant to describe arts-based approaches from various perspectives, positioning myself as an engaged rather than a detached researcher. These descriptions and reflections serve as sources of knowledge and personal agency that I aim to emphasize.

4.1 Photovoice

For peace education and particularly for unlearning, I believe it is essential to perceive matters from a deeper perspective and notably from assorted viewpoints. This is important for challenging and deconstructing dominant narratives. A pluriversal notion of peace involves getting to know and recognizing various simultaneous existences of worlds and realities. Therefore, before delving into discussions about peace itself, my peace education class begins with an activity called 'imaginaries/images of peace.' I invite students to capture and share images that depict their vision of peace. Each student presents their photograph and receives diverse insights from their peers on the image. This participatory technique is known as Photovoice, a method that allows individuals to identify, represent, and augment their community's voice through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). Theoretically, it draws from feminist theory (Collins, 1990) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1990), advocating for knowledge co-creation and community-driven social change. Employed as a participatory qualitative research method, Photovoice seeks to facilitate social transformation by enabling community members to produce visual content concerning socially pertinent issues that affect their community and can influence policymakers (Liebenberg, 2018).

It is particularly important for me to engage the class in reflecting on the diverse interpretations of peace and the similarities and differences in these perceptions, both on an individual basis and collectively. Until now, the students' photographs/images have shown pronounced similarities, frequently depicting nature with themes like mountains, gardens, forests, beaches, or showcasing their families and loved ones. They associate peace with harmony, relationships, beauty, relaxation, and predominantly, inner tranquillity. Occasionally, they present photos tied to justice and social inclusion, such as a photograph of a person in a wheelchair amid friends, or depictions of protests and social movements, though such pictures are rare. Although all photographs illustrate varying depictions of peace, there is a remarkable similarity in their conceptualizations of peace. I have always been curious if conducting this exercise in a different context, location, or country would result in a more varied set of images or those more closely related to justice themes. In this higher education setting in

Austria, nature is the primary image of peace. From this exercise, it is visible that the portrayal of inner peace is strongly linked to nature. This may be considered a romanticized depiction of nature, but it undeniably demonstrates a deep emotional bond with nature, as well as peace's relational quality to other sentient beings. Peace is also associated with emotions and physical sensation, rather than with abstract ideas or concepts. I wonder if it is a privilege to depict peace as inner peace with images from nature or if it highlights the interconnectivity with the world. Following the photographic presentations, I introduce the students to various concepts and ideas about peace while maintaining focus on the embodied aspects of peace and conflict. The Forum Theatre, also known as the Theatre of the Oppressed, serves as an important resource in this endeavour.

4.2 Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed which was inspired by his mentor and teacher Paulo Freire is an especially beneficial way of revealing inequalities and possible courses of action (Boal, 2000). I had the chance to be a participant of a course held by Birgit Fritz who also wrote a book on Boal's theatre work (Fritz, 2013) and at the same time teach this work in my classes. Freire (1990) and Boal (2000) provide very much inspiration for unlearning and pluriversal pedagogies. The anti-hierarchical stance and attitude of the teacher is crucial to create dialogical learning and the constant engagement of action and reflection. Boal (2000) views theatre as a way to de-mechanize the body and unlearn routines that are stored in our bodies. For him theatre is a possibility to experience things from different perspectives and worlds (Boal, 2000).

"Theatre of the Oppressed is an embodied prototyping exercise. Not only does it give people the chance to embody and experience alternative points of view/positions of privilege or power (or lack, thereof), it also allows a group to negotiate a number of possible solutions to a conflict." (Tyrrell, 2019, n. p.)

Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) argue, "[s]ince theater is a deeply reflective embodying process, not only can the experience be understood in deeper and new ways, one can also practice alternative ways of responding to a situation, thus creating opportunities for change" (ibid., p. 36). I agree with Boal's assertion that "perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. [...] No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!" (Boal, 2000, p. 98). Reflection is also a crucial part of the Theatre of the Oppressed: reflection on one's own role, the situation itself and the audience's interventions. Being a participant of Theatre of the Oppressed, I could experience expressions of myself that I did not know or remember. Like speaking very loudly to set boundaries very clear. Many times, the patriarchal structures at home, at work or in society as a whole became present during the theatre work. I knew that it was very present in my life, but I did not know that it

was embodied in certain postures or that my voice became silent in scenes with dominant men.

Teaching Theatre of the Oppressed I ask students to act out a social conflict or scenes of inequality where the protagonist wants to change something but does not know how. Often, students choose situations involving oppression based on racial, economic and gender inequalities. Through the Theatre of the Oppressed, the students can experience and see how different actions influence a situation and thus become aware of their own actions. I have experienced students being moved and affected by the situations and actions that are performed or tried out. Very often the students were surprised about their reactions or the way they acted out certain roles. Students mentioned, how impressed they were how real the scenes felt like. Even though the roles are played out it can feel very real. Especially when students chose the role of the oppressor, they were shocked by the behaviour and discriminatory language they used. This shows how racism is ingrained in our structures and institutions and how easily we have access to this form of violence. Students became aware that discrimination and racism are not something outside or far away but also stored in our language and bodies. I think this work is really meaningful for becoming aware of and unlearning violent structures. There is always the possibility to change the situation and try out new actions. Since this work can delve deeply, it is crucial to be sensitive to the group and its dynamics.

In the next section I introduce the last method which is slightly different and focuses on the embodied and non-verbal knowledge.

4.3 Social Presencing Theater

As a participant in the Erasmus+ project *Inner Pathways toward a Regenerative Future* for youth workers and educators from across Europe, I had the opportunity to experience Social Presencing Theater. This approach views performance as a form of everyday social-making (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021), particularly in terms of fostering connections with oneself, others, the community, and the *Mitwelt*. The method can reveal patterns in social systems and cultivate creativity, presence and awareness within communities. I have experienced the Village activity, which “explores the function of awareness in the co-creative process” and “the ways in which groups create coherent social structures” (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021, pp. 39–41). The Village was created by the choreographer Arawana Hayashi. After a short meditation to ground in the space, groups of ten to twenty people start exploring the room non-verbally. During the session I was involved in, people walked, sat, lay down and interacted with one other non-verbally, or remained alone. At the beginning it was very difficult for me to engage non-verbally with a group of people and to find my place in the room. Some people engaged with one another playfully; some just lay on the floor and others stood in the middle of the central square while others turned their back on it. The

aim is to maintain a mindful attention and awareness of the entire social space (both the visible structure, referred to as the social body, and the invisible relational quality, termed the social field). Various dimensions can be explored: levels (e. g., lying down, sitting, or standing), proximity (distance to others), and direction (which way one is facing). This specific physical and spatial vocabulary affords choice-making which becomes the raw material for group exploration, reflection, and learning (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 42).

One of the participants said that she felt like a non-human being interacting with others inside a living organism. To me, it was like following my bodily impulses in a social setting. At the beginning, it felt really foreign to me to engage in that way. After practising the activity several times, I felt more and more part of the Village and could sense how my movements influenced the social space. I became aware of the special atmosphere and how we were all in the same room and at the same time in different worlds and realities. Hayashi and Gonçalves (2021) see the Village as “an example of collective making, knowing-in-action (Heron & Reason, 2008), and shaping of a micro version of the social world” as well as engaging through “aesthetic language, aesthetic being the opposite of anaesthetic (i. e., numb), that which is felt” (ibid., pp. 43–44). I also experienced the relational qualities that Hayashi and Gonçalves (2021) mention: the need to belong, being playful or curious and the feeling of inclusion/exclusion, connection and disconnection (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 44). During the group reflection, it was extremely clear that some people felt very included and experienced great harmony in the Village, while others felt disconnected and experienced disharmony. I realized that people have very different experiences even though sharing the same space. During this exercise I could experience the embodied aspect of the group and the nonverbal dynamics. I was unlearning to just interact with language and words, which was at the beginning very strange. As Hayashi and Gonçalves (2021) describe, aesthetic language can help people to move “from ego (talking about one’s individual and emotional experience) to eco (having a sense of the whole)” (ibid., p. 54). By supporting people access the embodied and felt dimension of their experience, “participants become aware of themselves as parts and co-creators of the system, rather than isolated from it” (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 54). For pluriversal peace education, it is crucial to experience relationality and to feel embedded within a larger structure/community.

5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, my journey through the complexities of engaging in peace education has been both enlightening and challenging. Peace, often depicted as a distant ideal or the mere absence of war, reveals itself through nuanced, relational, and context-dependent lenses. The conventional liberal notions of peace, rooted in Western modernity, often overlook the ontological and epistemological violence embedded in

their frameworks, reinforcing hierarchical and exclusionary structures. Embracing a pluriversal perspective on peace demands a radical reimagining of our conceptual frameworks. It challenges the hegemony of Western-centric ideas and recognizes the multiplicity of peace understandings across diverse cultures and contexts, as well as the coexisting worlds that exist interconnected. This approach invites us to unlearn and decolonize knowledge, recognizing the plurality of narratives and realities that constitute our world.

As a peace educator, I have come to appreciate the transformative potential of arts-based and embodied methods in challenging one-world perspectives and its ingrained social injustices. Photovoice, for instance, enables participants to visually articulate their visions of peace, fostering empathy and understanding across diverse perspectives. Forum Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed engages participants in embodied exploration of social conflicts, encouraging them to experiment with alternative actions and perspectives. This pedagogical ethos, informed by Freirean principles of dialogue and praxis, emphasizes horizontal learning dynamics that challenge hierarchical teacher-student relationships and promote co-creation of knowledge. Social Presencing Theater, through non-verbal interaction and mindfulness practices, enhances awareness of social structures and promotes collective creativity. These methods create spaces for deep reflection, empathy, and collective action. They enable participants to embody alternative perspectives, confront systemic inequalities, and envision new pathways toward peace.

Moreover, the journey of unlearning entrenched norms and hierarchies in educational settings is crucial. By cultivating safe and brave spaces for dialogue and introspection, educators can foster transformative learning experiences that empower students to challenge dominant narratives and co-create knowledge in equitable, participatory ways. In essence, arts-based pedagogies in peace education can transcend the classroom to become a lived commitment to justice, empathy, and interconnectedness. It invites us to embrace vulnerability, creativity, and dialogue as essential tools for building pluriversal peace. By embracing pluriversal visions of peace and engaging in critical self-reflection, we move closer to realizing a world where peace is not merely an aspiration, but a tangible reality shaped by diverse voices.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Pantheon Books.
- Akomolafe, B. (2017). *These wilds beyond our fences. Letters to my daughter on humanity's search for home*. North Atlantic Books.
- Anderson, R. (2004). A definition of peace. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 10(2), 101–116. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac1002_2

- Andreotti, V. d. O. (2011). *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230337794>
- Andreotti, V. d. O. (2021). *Hospicing Modernity. Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. North Atlantic Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1978). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. aunt lute books.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2015). *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Duke University Press.
- Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135–150). ACPA College Student Educators International/Stylus.
- Ávila, A. C. (2021). Dance as a tool for the construction of peace and identity. In T. Prentki & A. Breed (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Applied Performance, Vol. 1*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351120142>
- Bishop, K., & Etmanski, C. (2021). Down the rabbit hole: Creating a transformative learning environment. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 53(2), 133–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2021.1879454>
- Boal, A. (2000). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Pluto Press.
- Brantmeier, E. J. (2013). Pedagogy of vulnerability: Definitions, assumptions, and applications. In J. Lin, Oxford, R. L. & Brantmeier, E. J. (Eds.), *Re-envisioning higher education. Embodied pathways to wisdom and social transformation* (pp. 95–106). Information Age.
- Brantmeier, E. J., & McKenna, M. K. (2020). Pedagogy of Vulnerability: Roots, Realities, and the Future. In E. J. Brantmeier & M. K. McKenna (Eds.), *Pedagogy of Vulnerability* (pp. 1–21). Information Age Publishing.
- Butterwick, S., & Lawrence, R. L. (2009). Creating Alternative Realities. Arts-Based Approaches to Transformative Learning. In J. Mezirow & E. W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative Learning in Practice. Insight from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education* (pp. 35–45). Jossey-Bass.
- Carter, C., & Guerra, R. B. (Eds.). (2022). *Educating for Peace through Theatrical Arts: International Perspectives on Peacebuilding Instruction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003227380>.
- Castro Varela, M. (2007). Verlernen und die Strategie des unsichtbaren Ausbesserns – Bildung und Postkoloniale Kritik. *Bildpunkt. Zeitschrift der IG Bildende Kunst* 8(3) Widerstand. Macht. Wissen, 4–12.
- Castro Varela, M. C. (2018). Imperiale Didaktiken. Unterrichten als Unterwerfungsmethode. In T. Becker, R. Hawlik, F. Jilek-Bergmaier & M. Sertl (Eds.), *Praxis des Unterrichts – Bildungstheoretische Auseinandersetzungen* (pp. 57–71). Studien Verlag.
- Choi, J. (2017). *Creating a multivocal self. Autoethnography as Method*. Routledge.
- Cohen, C., Guteiérrez Varea, R., & Walker, P. O. (2011). *Acting together Vol 1: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict. Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence*. New Village.

- Collins P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. Unwin Hyman.
- de la Cadena, M., & Blaser, M. (2018). *A World of Many Worlds*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478004318>
- Dietrich, W. (2012). *Interpretations of peace in history and culture*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230367715>
- Dietrich, W., & Sützl, W. (1997). A Call for Many Peaces, *Schlaing Workingpapers* 7.
- Eisler, R., & Miller, R. (2004). *Educating for a culture of peace*. Heinemann.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Alta Mira Press.
- Escobar, A. (2007). Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 179–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162506>
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371816>
- Escobar, A. (2020). *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012108>
- Fisher-Yoshida, B., Dee Geller K. & Schapiro, S. A. (2009). *Innovations in Transformative Learning: Space, Culture, & the Arts*. Lang.
- Fontan, V. (2012). *Decolonizing Peace*. Dignity Press.
- Formenti, L., & West, L. (2018). *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education. A dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96388-4>
- Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum Press.
- Fritz, B. (2013). *Von Revolution zu Autopoiese: Auf den Spuren Augusto Boals ins 21. Jahrhundert: Das Theater der Unterdrückten im Kontext von Friedensarbeit und einer Ästhetik der Wahrnehmung*. ibidem.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2012). Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas. *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, 388–404.
- Hawksley, M. & Mitchell, J. (2020). Introduction. In J. Mitchell, G. Vincett, T. Hawksley & H. Culbertson (Eds.), *Peacebuilding and the Arts* (pp. 1–31). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17875-8_1.
- Hayashi, A. & Gonçalves, R. D. (2021). A pattern language for social field shifts: Cultivating embodied and perceptual capacities of social groups through aesthetics and social field archetypes. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 1(1), 35–57. <https://doi.org/10.47061/jabsc.v1i1.478>.
- Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2008). Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (pp. 366–380). Sage Publications.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.270>.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community. A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.

- Horner, L. K. (2013). Peace as an event, peace as Utopia: a re-imagining of peace and its Implications for peace education and development. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(3), 366– 379.
- Illeris, K. (2014). *Transformative Learning and Identity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614548423>
- Jalka, S. (2018). *Denken. Kunst. Frieden. Annäherungen an das Menschsein*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110589894>
- Koppensteiner, N. (2018). Kulturen der Frieden: Eine transrationale Perspective. In S. Jalka (Ed.), *Denken. Kunst. Frieden. Annäherungen an das Menschsein* (pp. 23–43). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110589894-003>
- Krohn, J., & Pauls, C. (2023). Friedensbildung otherwise? Überlegungen zu einer dekolonial informierten Friedensbildung. *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, 12, 5–30.
- Lederach, J. P. (1995). *Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures*. Syracuse University.
- Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking Critically About Photovoice: Achieving Empowerment and Social Change. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631>
- Mac Ginty, R. (2021). *Everyday Peace: How so-called Ordinary People can disrupt Violent Conflict*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197563397.001.0001>.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the Coloniality of Being. Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 240–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2008). *Against War. Views from the Underside of Modernity*. Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2018). On Pluriversality and Multipolar World Order: Decoloniality after Decolonization; Dewesternization after the Cold War. In B. Reiter (Ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (pp. 90–116). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779>
- Muñoz, F. A. (2006). La paz imperfecta. In W. Dietrich., J. Echavarria., G. Esteva., D. Ingruber & N. Koppensteiner (Eds.), *Schlüsseltexte der Friedensforschung* (pp. 392–421). LIT Verlag.
- Palfrey, J. (2017). *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces. Diversity and Free Expression in Education*. Cambridge. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11245.001.0001>
- Perry, M. (2020). Pluriversal Literacies: Affect and Relationality in Vulnerable Times, *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(2), 293–390. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.312>
- Prentki, T. (2015). *Applied theatre: Development*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472506658>
- Prentki, T., & Breed, A. (2021). *The Routledge Companion to Applied Performance*. Vol. 2. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351120142>
- Richmond, O. P. (2005). *The Transformation of Peace*. Palgrave MacMillan.

- Spivak, G. C. (1995). Teaching for the times. In J. Nederveen Pieterse & B. Parekh (Eds.), *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power* (pp. 177–202). Zed.
- Spivak, G. C. (2004). Righting wrongs. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2–3), 523–581. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-103-2-3-523>
- Tjersland, H. (2022). From a Place of Not Fully Knowing. Devising Theatre with Young Adults in Austria as a Vulnerable Process of Elicitive Peace Education. In C. C. Carter & R. Benza Guerra (Eds.), *Educating for Peace through Theatrical Arts* (pp. 71–90), Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003227380-5>
- Tyrrell, A. (2019). *Relationship to Ambiguity*. <https://dlibrary.stanford.edu/ambiguity/theatre-of-the-oppressed>. (Accessed: 2023-08-06).
- Wang, C. & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Wenders, W. & Zournazi, M. (2013). *Inventing Peace a dialogue on perception*. I. B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755694730>
- Williams, H., M. A., & Bermeo, M. J. (2020). A Decolonial Imperative: Pluriversal Rights Education. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 4(1), 1–33.
- Yorks, L. & Kasl, E. (2006). I Know More Than I Can Say. A Taxonomy for Using Expressive Ways of Knowing to Foster Transformative Learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(1), 43–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605283151>
- Zembylas, M. (2017). The quest for cognitive justice: towards a pluriversal human rights education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15(4), 397–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1357462>
- Zembylas, M. (2018). Con-/divergences between postcolonial and critical peace education: towards pedagogies of decolonization in peace education. *Journal of Peace Education*, 15(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2017.1412299>