

Continuous Support from European Universities to Peace Education in Colombia: A report from the Unit for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Innsbruck (Austria)



Peace educators / researchers gather at the Campus el Carmen de Viboral of the University of Antioquia on March 3, 2017. Left to right: Josefina Echavarría (Univ. Innsbruck), Roberth Uribe (Univ. of Antioquia), Francesco Ferrari (Univ. of Jena), Cecilia Plested (Univ. of Antioquia) Martin Leiner (Univ. of Jena).

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As the peace initiatives in Colombia continue to flourish during the challenging phase of the implementation of the peace agreements between the government and the FARC-EP, several universities from Europe are visiting the country, learning from and lending support to local approaches to peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

As Senior Lecturer at the University of Innsbruck (Austria), I have been directly involved in the contacts that my university is establishing with other academics in order to support peace education in Colombia. Therefore, the accounts I present in the following short report are merely illustrative of the many different contacts and connections that are happening and to which we hope to contribute, yet these are far from being a representative sample.

Interinstitutional Alliance: Epistemologies for Peace Education

The MA Program and UNESCO Chair for Peace Studies has contributed to establish the “Interinstitutional Alliance Dialogue of Epistemologies for Peace Education” (Span. *Diálogo de Saberes: Encuentro Alianza Interinstitucional de Educación para la Paz Territorial*). The Alliance was created in Medellín past August 2016 and was envisioned as an informal cooperation among universities with offices of the local government along five lines of inquiry: 1) Training (formal and informal peace education courses); 2) Research (to deepen peace research about vernacular approaches to peace education); 3) Organization of international academic events (to lend spaces and times for peace educators to meet, discuss and share); 4) Monitoring and Evaluation using Appreciative Inquiry Methodologies (especially relevant in the formulation of public policies in relation to Active Citizenship); and 5) Communication (creation of a network with publications to make the existing and new developing knowledge available).

The Alliance was created by the universities of Antioquia, Javeriana (Cali), Cambridge (UK) and Innsbruck, in cooperation with the office for the Attention to Victims, the office of Citizen’s Participation, Museum House of Memory and the office of Education of the city of Medellín.

Considering its informal character and thanks to the voluntary work of the main persons involved, the Alliance has already given relevant and concrete fruits along these five lines:

During August and September 2016, the University of Innsbruck co-organized a series of events with researcher Terence Bevington of the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University. Specifically, the Alliance participated in several public forums about Peace Education, in courses about Restorative Approaches to Justice in Peace Education and several visits to schools in Medellín where innovative approaches to peace education are being developed.

In October 2016, the University of Innsbruck held a series of seminars and workshops on topics of peace and conflict transformation in line with the Alliance’s spirit of visibility and appreciation for vernacular epistemologies for peace. The UNESCO Chairholder, Prof. Wolfgang Dietrich, visited Cali, Medellín and Bogotá for these purposes.

The University of Antioquia is further creating a Peace Library where new published material about peace education will be made available in Spanish to deepen this international dialogue and foster cooperation among international and vernacular visions for peace education:

- “Positive Peace in Schools: Tackling Conflict and Creating a Culture of Peace in the Classroom” by Hilary Cremin and Terence Bevington (University of Cambridge, UK)
- “A Short Introduction to the Philosophy of Transrational Peaces and Elicitive Conflict Transformation” by Wolfgang Dietrich and Josefina Echavarría Álvarez (University of Innsbruck, Austria)
- “Approaches to Reconciliation from around the World” edited by Martin Leiner and Francesco Ferrari (University of Jena, Germany)

Peace Research: Master’s Program and Doctorate Studies about Peace and Reconciliation

In this crucial moment for peacebuilding, we believe that peace education plays a vital role in anchoring more permanent platforms for peaceful conflict transformation in the country. This is one of the reasons why we are interested in supporting efforts that help deepen peace research about the processes that are happening on the

ground, which can further serve to create networks, influence public policy and help ease the transition from war to peace.

In February 2017, with the University of Antioquia we co-organized a trip from the University of Jena, Germany, in order to start gaining a first impression of the challenges for reconciliation that Colombia is facing. Several academic events took place, including exploratory visits to sites of memory in Medellin, as well as courses, conferences and the signing of interinstitutional academic agreements.

It was an important objective to also present the academic offer that in terms of MA Programs and Doctorate Programs are available for peace researchers that could be supported by universities in Europe. The MA Program in Peace, Development, Security and International Conflict Transformation at the **University of Innsbruck** and the PhD in Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation at the **University of Jena** offer support for students. The MA Program in Innsbruck has scholarships for persons coming from Colombia to participate in this innovative course. The PhD in Jena has created a special line of potential benefits for applicants who want to conduct peace and reconciliation research on Colombia. This academic offer is available online and has been also spread to public and private universities in the country.

As mentioned above, while these accounts are not representative, they show how fertile and vibrant Colombia is as a place for peace educators to see, feel and learn from initiatives that have grown out of decades of overcoming obstacles in the midst of violence. In the upcoming month of September, the Universities of Innsbruck, Jena and Antioquia will be holding a reconciliation course with practical components to bridge distances between reconciliation and reintegration efforts and the competences, abilities and skills that peacebuilding demand from all of us. These peace education initiatives give us hope for a more robust and long-lasting peace, while also require us – as peace educators globally – to reach out to those who might need support in this difficult transition from war to peace.