

How to use a student-led peacebuilding project or consultancy as an alternative to traditional assessments in peace and conflict studies

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Introduction

Peace and conflict studies attract a wide variety of students with diverse identities, learning preferences and career ambitions. This diversity must inform all learning and teaching¹. Whereas diverse learning preferences require different assessments, diverse career ambitions also call for these different assessments to be authentic². Basically, whereas traditional academic essays and theses cater well for students, who prefer studying books and articles at their own pace by themselves, it does not, to the same degree, benefit students who prefer to learn in group settings and by practically applying their skills. In addition, whereas the process and output of writing an essay or a thesis might be closely aligned with real-world tasks in academia, it is not necessarily closely linked with working in a civil society organisation, where developing project proposals and reports are much more common.

This chapter demonstrates how using a student-led peacebuilding project or consultancy as an assessment can provide students with the opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world tasks that clearly mirror experiences they are likely to encounter in their future careers. Moreover, a student-led peacebuilding project or consultancy not only provides students with relevant experience, but they also allow students to improve their skills and develop professional networks that can help them gain employment. The chapter is based on the author's experience of leading two master programmes in reconciliation and peacebuilding at a British university that attracted a very diverse student body.

Supported by their own initial research, a peacebuilding project offers students the opportunity to identify an issue that they are interested in and that is not currently being addressed in their local community. It also allows them to showcase their knowledge about how that issue can be addressed and that they can independently, creatively and critically develop a relevant project. They can also demonstrate their project management and problem-solving skills, and they can improve their interpersonal skills through their engagement with local stakeholders.

A consultancy offers the student the opportunity to carry out an agreed piece of work for an organisation of their choice and that preferably is linked to their career plans. It provides them with the opportunity to show that they can initiate a collaboration and develop a working relationship with the commissioning organisation. It also allows them to demonstrate that they can negotiate the parameters for a consultancy project and that they can implement it effectively within a set timeframe. Furthermore, it also allows them the opportunity to show

¹ Tai, Joanna, Rola Ajjawi, Margaret Bearman, David Boud, Phillip Dawson, and Trina Jorre de St Jorre. 2023. "Assessment for Inclusion: Rethinking Contemporary Strategies in Assessment Design." *Higher Education Research & Development* 42 (2): 483–97. doi:10.1080/07294360.2022.2057451.

² Srinivasan, Rajashree. 2015. "Peace Education in Higher Education: Using Authentic Assessment Practices to Build Peace". Chapter in *Peace Education Evaluation: Learning from Experience and Exploring Prospects*. Edited by Del Felice, Celina, Karako, Aaron and Wisler, Andria. Emerald Publishing Limited

that they can carry out a real-life task such as planning an event, facilitating a training session or evaluating a programme. Examples include a conflict and peace student that helped an organisation evaluate an anti-militarisation programme they were running in local schools and another student that supported the organisation of a conference for young peacebuilders.

The assessment of both the peacebuilding project and the consultancy consist of three parts. Firstly, a project or consultancy proposal (suggested word limit 2-3.000 words); secondly, a project or consultancy report (suggested word limit 8-10.000 words) and thirdly a critical reflection on the process (suggested word limit 2-3.000 words). These carefully mirror the kind of outputs students will likely be expected to develop in their future careers and hence they help provide an authentic learning experience. It is recommended that the student keeps a diary of issues and challenges they encounter throughout the initiation, development, implementation and evaluation of the project/consultancy since this will aid their development of the critical reflection that is the final part of the assessment. It is important to emphasise that both projects and consultancies should be assessed for their value as a learning experience not by whether they succeeded in achieving their aims as this is not solely dependent on the actions of the student.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both options provide students with the opportunity to make a positive contribution to their local community, or the organisation they are working for.

Initiating and Developing the Peacebuilding Project or Consultancy

Initiating and Developing the Peacebuilding Project

The student's first step in initiating a peacebuilding project is to establish that there is a local issue that is either not being addressed, or that a local organization would like support to address. This initial research can either be based on data that is already available or that the student collects themselves, such as through direct outreach to related non-profits, city or local government, or other key stakeholders.

Based on their subject knowledge, an initial review of the literature, their creative and critical thinking skills and a consultation with relevant stakeholders, the student decides what kind of intervention they would like to initiate. An example of this process was a case, where conflict between students sharing accommodation at a university was increasing. A master student suggested setting up a student-led mediation service and conducted a survey to see if the students were supportive of that idea.

To help determine who should be the project advisor, the student must fill in a registration form. The form should provide information about the student's initial thoughts on the context, scope and aim(s) of the project. It should also identify key stakeholders and ethical concerns, proposed methods and methodology and a short bibliography of relevant literature. Once a project advisor has been allocated and they have approved the initial idea, the next step is for the student to carry out a thorough review of relevant literature to ensure that the project has a strong theoretical foundation.

Based on this review, the data from the initial research and conversations with the project advisor and key stakeholders, the student establishes a suitable scope, aim(s) and rationale for the peacebuilding project and develops a clear plan for it. The plan must include a sound

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methodology that illustrates an informed and critical understanding of relevant issues, concepts and theories, and a strategy for how diverse participation from key stakeholders will be ensured. It must also include ethical considerations especially concerning human participation, a step-by-step timeline and a plan for how the project will be evaluated including criteria and indicators. The student must address all these aspects in a project proposal that forms part of the assessment of the peacebuilding project.

Initiating and Developing the Peacebuilding Consultancy

The student's first step in initiating and developing a peacebuilding consultancy is to identify what kind of work they are interested in and capable of carrying out. The next step is to identify and contact relevant organisations. If the student does not get a timely response, it might help to suggest three different options for what a consultancy could potentially focus on to the organisations. Course staff and alumni can also help establish the initial contact to organisations; they are working with. Examples of this include a student that developed a consultancy focusing on evaluating an interreligious training programme that was led by an alumni working for a civil society organisation.

Once a suitable commissioning organisation has agreed to host the student, the next step is to fill in a registration form to enable the allocation of a consultancy advisor. In addition to providing the name and contact details of the proposed commissioning organisation, the form should ask for the same information as above. Once a consultancy advisor has been appointed and approved the initial idea for the consultancy, the student must initiate a collaborative relationship with the commissioning organisation and negotiate the scope and the aim(s) of the consultancy with them. It is important that the consultancy advisor is kept informed about the progress of these negotiations and that they approve of what is initially being agreed.

As with the peacebuilding project, the student must now conduct a review of the literature that will form the foundation for the development of the consultancy. Based on the literature and in continuous consultation with the consultancy advisor, the student must now negotiate the terms of reference with the organisation. The terms of reference must clearly set out the background, context, scope and aim(s) of the consultancy as well as the research methods and methodologies that will be applied. They must also set out deliverables and milestones, the qualifications and requirements of the consultant and evaluation criteria and indicators. It is also especially important that they clearly establish roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, how ethical considerations will be addressed and how the financial aspects of the project will be addressed. As an example, even if the student is not being paid an hourly or daily rate, they might still need the organisation to cover some costs such as for transportation.

Then the student is required to set up a meeting where they, their consultancy advisor and the organisation agree to the terms of reference. The details of the terms of reference, between the student and the partner organization, should be in writing, with the student, the professor and the partner organisation each retaining a copy.

Finally, based on the terms of reference, the student must develop a consultancy proposal that will be assessed. In the proposal the student should clearly show that they can negotiate, develop and plan an achievable and relevant consultancy and set out the main aspects of it. In addition, they must also demonstrate that they have an informed and critical understanding of

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relevant issues, concepts and theories as well as the professional context the consultancy is situated in.

The Roles of the Program Director and the Project or Consultancy Advisor

At this stage the program director must collect the registration form from the students and allocate them an appropriate project/consultancy advisor. Once the project/consultancy advisor has signed and returned the registration form the program director must review, approve and sign the registration form.

The project or consultancy advisors must:

- Approve the student's initial idea for the project/consultancy.
- Sign the registration form and return it to the program director.
- Meet regularly with the student and support the initiation and development of the peacebuilding project/consultancy ensuring that each aspect of the planning and design of the project/consultancy:
 - Is appropriate for the context,
 - Has feasible scope, aim(s) and timeline,
 - Has a sound methodology,
 - Is grounded in relevant literature.
- Approve the student's plan for the peacebuilding project/consultancy before the student begins to implement the project/consultancy.
- Support the student's development of the assessed project/consultancy proposal.

In addition, the consultancy advisor must:

- Support finding a suitable organisation that the student can safely work with.
- Agree to the student working with the chosen organisation,
- Support the student's initial negotiations with the organisation about the scope and aim(s) of the work and approve the initial agreement.
- Support the negotiations of the terms of reference and agree to them.
- Meet with the student and the organisation to make sure everyone agrees to the terms of reference.

Implementing and Evaluating the Peacebuilding Project or Consultancy

Implementing and Evaluating the Peacebuilding Project

In this phase, as part of the final course, the student uses their project management skills to turn their project plan into action. They must use their interpersonal skills to initiate and build the relationships that are significant for the implementation of the project including at least attempting to build relationships across any difference and/or division. They are also required to continuously integrate relevant concepts, principles, theories and methods into the project and their practices that must also be informed by relevant ethical-, legal and professional values. As an example, a student, who was also a member of a religious community, researched different narratives techniques and used her knowledge and skills to implement a project that aimed to build relationships across divisions in their community. Moreover, the student must also demonstrate that they can work independently and that they can make decisions, solve problems and address challenges based on recommendations in relevant

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literature. Finally, they must also carry out an evaluation of the peacebuilding project based on the criteria and indicators they set out in the project proposal. They must address all these issues in a project report that forms the second part of the final assessment.

Implementing and Evaluating the Peacebuilding Consultancy

In this phase the student carries out the work that has been agreed while also developing working relationships with key stakeholders. The student needs to keep the commissioning organisation and their consultancy advisor updated about their progress and any issues they face. Once the work has been completed, the student must develop a report to the commissioning organisation (suggested word limit is 4-6,000 words). This report should include an evaluation of how and to what degree the aim(s) of the consultancy has been achieved and a critical evaluation of the methods and methodologies that have been applied. It must also contain a critical analysis of the activities undertaken and present findings and recommendations if applicable to the consultancy. The student must submit this report to the consultancy advisor and get their approval before the report is sent to the commissioning organisation for feedback that must be shared with the consultancy advisor. This report forms the basis for the development of the consultancy report that is part of the assessment. In addition to the issues addressed in the report to the commissioning organisation, the consultancy report also needs to illustrate that the student can use relevant concepts and theories to inform their thinking and practice and in their analysis of the activities undertaken. They must also demonstrate that they can critically use data and academic literature to support well-developed arguments and that they have an informed and critical understanding of the limitations of the consultancy.

The Roles of the Program Director and the Project/Consultancy Advisor

In this phase the role of the program director is to act as a point of contact in case any stakeholders involved in the project or consultancy has any complaints about the ways the student is implementing them. In addition, the program director should also provide support if there are any ethical concerns that the project/consultancy advisor is unsure how to address.

The project and consultancy advisors must:

- Receive regular updates from the student about how the project/consultancy is progressing.
- When needed, meet with the student to discuss issues and challenges the student is facing.
- Support the development of the project/consultancy report.

In addition, the project advisor must:

- When possible, visit the project to support the student.

In addition, the consultancy advisor must:

- Keep in regular contact with the commissioning organisation and ensure they are happy with the work; the student is doing.
- Support the student in developing a report with the results of the consultancy and possible recommendations for the commissioning organisation and approve the report before it is sent to the commissioning organisation.

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Reflecting on the Peacebuilding Project or Consultancy

Reflecting on the Peacebuilding Project

In the final phase students must critically engage with relevant concepts, principles, theories and methods while they reflect on their actions, experiences and achievements while carrying out the peacebuilding project. They must also critically engage with the theories, approaches and methods they have used to develop relationships with key stakeholders and reflect on how useful they have been. As an example, a student reflected on how her role as a member of school staff had affected the design and implementation of her peacebuilding project that focused on improving the emotional intelligence of some of the pupils in her school. Finally, the student must also identify some lessons they have learned and use them to reflect on how their practices can be improved. Throughout their reflections students must demonstrate that they can selectively use and critically evaluate a diverse range of resources to discuss the arguments they are making and that they can engage with ethical, legal and professional values as appropriate. An example is provided in the appendix.

Reflecting on the Peacebuilding Consultancy

In their reflection, the student needs to demonstrate that they can critically engage with concepts, theories, context and ethical, legal and professional values while reflecting on how they have executed the role as a consultant. They also need to show that they have an informed and critical understanding of the professional context and that they can critically analyse their collaboration with the commissioning organisation on the agreed piece of work considering the feedback they have received about it. In addition, the student also needs to critically evaluate the effectiveness of their learning on the program in relation to the requirements of the consultancy and identify any gaps in their knowledge, skills and attributes that they need to address. Throughout the critical reflection the student needs to showcase that they can use and critically evaluate relevant sources to discuss the arguments they are making.

The Roles of the Program Director and the Project/Consultancy Advisor

The program director continues to be the point of contact for stakeholders with concerns until the project/consultancy has been fully implemented.

The project and consultancy advisors must:

- Support the development of critical reflection.
- Gather feedback from key stakeholders and ensure they are happy with the work that has been carried out. This will help them get a better understanding of the student's experiences and aid the marking of the assessments.

Conclusion

This chapter has set out how a student-led peacebuilding project or consultancy can be used as an alternative assessment offering students authentic learning experiences that enhance their knowledge and skills and help them build their professional career.

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