



Lessons in navigating conflict from Northern Ireland

BY EMILY BYERS-FERRIAN AND SHANNON KEENY

Eighteen people from different countries sat in a circle of chairs in a room facing the Sea of Moyle, some having traveled far to reach Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, for a week of learning about skillful responses to conflict and living better together across differences.

Addressing the group was Colin Craig, founder of Dialogue for Peaceful

Change Global, a method that supports the development of individual and group capacity to transform conflict (Dialogue for Peaceful Change, n.d.). Craig, a person of Northern Ireland who has facilitated peaceful change processes with groups locally and internationally since the 1970s, introduced himself and gestured toward the large windows, referring to the land and sea as his co-facilitation

partners. He then invited each person to share something about the story of their name and what inspired them to participate in this learning experience. Participants came from Ireland, Sweden, Italy, and England, representing such diverse professions as pastor, mediator, activist, therapist, leadership coach, and educator.

We were three Americans in the mix (Emily and Shannon plus another

colleague), each of us a group facilitator working in educational settings across the United States, leading professional learning with hundreds of educators on skillful responses to differences.

Over the years, we have experienced a lot of conflict ourselves — when facilitating the development of trust and understanding across disparate cultural groups within school communities, when coaching constructive cross-cultural conversations with parents, guardians, and staff, and when consulting with school leaders taking intentional actions toward equity in education, which at times included responding to incidents of cultural destructiveness.

At the core of our work is a commitment to cultural proficiency and responsiveness, having begun our careers in facilitation informed by the Center for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice. The center's framework highlights five essential elements of cultural proficiency: assessing cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge (The Center for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice, n.d.).

While working with individuals and groups, especially since the pandemic, we have found that the third element, managing the dynamics of difference, is where progress toward equitable systemic change tends to stall. This element of the framework articulates the importance of understanding conflict as a normal part of life and developing skills to navigate those conflicts in positive, constructive ways.

However, the strategies we witnessed and sometimes employed ourselves were not always positive or constructive. When faced with conflict, we watched teachers avoid, children accommodate, administrators control, and parents or guardians compromise — giving up a little to get a little back rather than finding ways forward that work for all. Stories of us versus them, and who is right or wrong, pervaded.

It turns out that the patterns of

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conflict we experienced were not unique to the school districts we worked within and are, in fact, part of a national trend toward binary thinking (Ripley, 2021). We concluded that if we were ever going to facilitate equity in schools in the U.S., we were going to need more effective knowledge, skills, and attitudes for navigating conflict in a constructive, culturally proficient way.

We read books, researched articles, and listened to podcasts about effective ways for managing the dynamics of difference in schools. However, we ultimately concluded that we needed to *experience* a better way to navigate conflict.

We asked ourselves, “Who already knows how to do this well?” The answer came in the form of an invitation: Five days of learning about Dialogue for Peaceful Change with Colin Craig at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland's oldest and largest peace and reconciliation organization.

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

As we gathered information about the learning opportunity at Corrymeela, we discovered we would get the chance to explore the nature of conflict, including its physiological effects.

We would look at conflict theory, our personal experiences with conflict, and conceptual frameworks and models that help locate and identify the drivers of conflict. We would explore the roles of peace building and mediative behaviors in transforming conflict from

something that destroys to something that strengthens.

Finally, we would practice applying specific tools and mediative communication techniques in an intensive, coached role-play with scenarios based on real-world conflicts gathered from cultures and regions around the world. And we would be doing it all in a place that has a unique relationship to conflict and change.

Northern Ireland is a country that has experienced polarization and intercommunity violence. Until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, communities were plagued with deadly sectarian conflict that, in simple terms, pitted Catholic Nationalists who wanted a united Ireland against Protestant Loyalists who identified with the United Kingdom. Many people continue to live by age-old assumptions, sometimes based solely on the spelling of a person's name: Martin = Loyalist; Máirtín = Nationalist.

Colin Craig explained that “when communities live the realities of deep systemic violence, they often seek shortcuts to categorize who is and who is not safe as well as what is and what is not safe to talk about.” In Northern Ireland today, people continue to live in segregated neighborhoods, not unlike those driven by racial, cultural, and class divisions in the United States.

When we arrived in Northern Ireland and settled into the residence hall in Ballycastle, where we would share lodging and meals with the other participants, we immediately became aware of our own assumptions about safety and fear.

We noticed that the bedroom doors didn't lock from the outside. We hesitated. *Should we take our passports with us?* we wondered when we were invited to join the others for tea and biscuits. We reminded each other that everyone was here to learn and build relationships. We chose to trust. Once we met Colin, his co-facilitator and wife Rachel, and the other 16 participants, we quickly realized there was no reason to worry about the lack of locks.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST

The first day of learning was a grounding day. In small groups, we shared stories, reflected on our values and perspectives, built connections, and deepened trust. That afternoon, we engaged in a simulation of how groups resolve a problem, which thereafter was dubbed “the Lego experience” because the seemingly simple task of working together to reconstruct a sculpture made of Legos proved surprisingly difficult when cultural norms of competition, hierarchy, and haste superseded collaboration and creativity.

While the content on its own was notable, we also noticed the way Colin and Rachel led the learning, developing the conditions for collaborative work while deliberately sharing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and frequently calling forward participants’ wisdom and experiences. This resonated with previous work we had read by Brenda and Franklin Campbell Jones (Campbell Jones et al., 2010) and Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman (1999).

On day two, we were ready to explore mental models surrounding conflict and break it down into stages that can be explored and critically examined and for which communication skills can be developed. We examined the stages of conflict, how our brains process conflict, mediative communication techniques, and an analysis process to break down a conflict into specific issues and dynamics.

While day two was a substantial analytical lift, it was paired with connecting to one another and our experiences, laughs, breaks for tea and biscuits, strolls outside taking in the view, and shared meals.

At this point, we realized what set this learning experience apart from anything we had previously engaged in as participants or facilitators: food. It wasn’t just the fact that we ate together. We’ve done that many times before with other groups. But this went beyond sharing the meal. Everyone — facilitators included — shared a moment of silence before the meal,

filled each other’s glasses, passed the salt, bussed each other’s plates, and took turns washing, drying, and storing the dishes.

What at first seemed like mundane tasks were actually part of creating the conditions for deep, shared learning. After meals and before reconvening, we took walks together along the shore; we began to understand what Colin meant when he referred to the land as a facilitator of learning.

The remainder of the week was centered around coached application practice with a six-step mediative process. We used authentic scenarios from around the world where Colin and Rachel have applied the frameworks, tools, mindsets, and processes with success.

The conflict scenarios cut across cultures: a small village where food insecurity is at the core of the conflict, a pair of neighbors fighting over the construction of a fence, and a board challenged by the very people it serves.

We role-played our new knowledge and skills, receiving real-time, continuous coaching during each step of the process. The fact that we had developed deep trust within the group is what made possible this kind of public practice paired with feedback.

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APPLYING THE LEARNING AT HOME

Upon returning home after five days of rich learning, a staff member at one of the schools we work with approached us with a conflict. She explained there was a rift within her team of eight, but that the whole team had agreed to meet with us to address it. We had the opportunity to see if the knowledge, skills, framework, and tools we learned in Northern Ireland could work in the U.S.

The conflict involved a group of teacher leaders in a department. Some had worked there for years, while others had recently joined. The new staff members were onboarded during COVID-19 school closures, so it was many months before the team met in person. Cultural differences quickly emerged in how individuals related to students, staff, one another, and their shared work.

In addition to their intrateam relational tensions, they also expressed difficulty navigating the varying expectations of other groups, including students, families, and administrators. They sought time and support to strengthen their team to better serve the community.

We applied the strategies we always use — such as learning as much as possible about the participants and selecting content and processes to activate their existing knowledge and values — and also drew on our experience with Colin and Rachel. We increased our focus on hospitality, developing trust within the group, and the nature of the learning environment.

For example, we reserved a space with natural light, played music, and arranged the furniture in configurations that facilitated movement as well as small- and large-group conversations. We dedicated time to sharing the stories of our names, practicing listening, and asking open-ended questions before we got into tackling the group’s challenges.

As facilitators, we were prepared to be flexible and fully present with participants, open to learning from them and adjusting. Because, as it turns out, hosting is not about setting a perfect table spread; it’s about a quality of presence that is sincere, generous, and open. It’s about offering tea or coffee and allowing participants to fill our cups as well.

In turning our attention to these things, we discovered that seemingly small shifts in the way *we were* with people made a difference in what *the group did* together. By the time



A view from Corrymeela at Ballycastle, Northern Ireland.

Photo by Emily Byers-Ferrian

we engaged in a strategy that assists people in breaking down a conflict into parts, the group was ready to proceed and own their conflict transformation together.

What had worked in our role-played scenarios also worked in our real-life context at home. Each participant walked away taking responsibility for a specific part of the problem they were facing as a group. Participants ended the session saying they felt hopeful, connected, and that they wanted to dedicate more of their time to constructive conversations like the one they engaged in that day. On the last day of our work with them, they spontaneously went out together for lunch.

SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE

As we continued to reflect on our learning in Northern Ireland and our subsequent experience, we wanted to share the lessons with others. Last December, we facilitated a two-hour session at Learning Forward's Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., with the hope of drawing at least 30 participants.

In fact, we maxed out at 125. We knew we were passionate about conflict transformation and found it crucial for our work in schools, but we were surprised and encouraged by how many other educators wanted to learn about it, too.

During our session, participants explored a tool for uncovering the hidden beliefs, assumptions, and values that result in conscious and unconscious biases leading to conflict. They practiced using an intentional questioning strategy for managing the dynamics of difference that interrupts biases and opens possibilities for new patterns of thought and action. The session concluded with participants developing an action plan to respond effectively to differences for equitable systemic change. Participants were highly engaged, and the session feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive.

A BETTER WAY OF BEING AND LEARNING

Trust is the glue that holds us together through challenging conversations and new shared learning. It can be built, sustained, and repaired over time, in part, through consistent, intentional acts such as sharing tea or coffee or in exchanging the stories of our names.

While binary thinking and unproductive responses to conflict may be prevalent today, our experience shows us that many people are seeking and practicing a better way of being and learning together, which gives us hope that co-creating more inclusive, loving, equitable experiences for students, staff, and families is possible.

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