

BUILDING INTERFAITH DIALOGUE THROUGH PEACE EDUCATION: PETRA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES¹

Linda Bustan
Petra Christian University

Introduction

In Indonesian context with diverse religions, cultures, and ethnicities, interactions are unavoidable. If these differences are not managed properly, conflicts will happen susceptibly. Based on “Annual Report of Religious Life in Indonesia 2012” by Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) - Gadjah Mada University, violence concerning apostasy and house of worship are quite recurrent.² Another research in Surabaya, studying groups with different religions and ethnicities, has found that conflicts occurred from those differences are caused by prejudice. Problems usually arise when people begin to believe that their own religion is the only right and superior one. Conflicts are almost inevitable when each of them put forward their argument to negate others from different religion. It is quite common in attempting to defend their own religion, violence could be used by either side.³ Therefore, it is essential to build mutual understanding, especially interreligious understanding and peacebuilding from this reality. One recommendation is to develop understanding through education that builds peace.

“Peace education is the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level.”⁴ It is not only a matter of transmitting knowledge, but transforming oneself as well as society. Peace education promotes values such as compassion, equality, interdependence, diversity, sustainability and nonviolence.⁵

¹ Short Essay was submitted to Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia (ACUCA) Management Conference, “Dialogue with the Culture: Implementing Values Education in the Multicultural Asia,” in Bandung – Indonesia, October 22-24, 2015.

² Cholil, Suhadi. ed. (2013). *Laporan Tahunan Kehidupan Beragama di Indonesia 2012*. Yogyakarta: Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies – Universitas Gadjah Mada, p. 51.

³ Kuntjara, Esther. (1993). “Promoting Peace in Christian Higher Education.” *Acuca Exchange*. Quezon City: Acuca, Vol. III No.1, June 1993, p. 111-120

⁴ Fountain, Susan. (1999). *Peace Education in Unicef*. New York: Unicef, p. 1

⁵ Christiani, Tabita K. 2011. *Foundations and Methods of Peace Education in Higher Education in Indonesia*. Paper presented in a workshop on Interreligious Understanding and Peacebuilding Initiatives (IUPI) United Board-UKDW. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana Christian University, p. 13-14.

Petra Christian University (PCU) has been involved in promoting peace education since 1993. ACUCA journal published in 1993 contained one article from PCU regarding this issue.⁶ However, PCU only implemented it about four years ago after conducting a research entitled “Encountering the (Ethno-religious) Other: Towards Inter-religious: Understanding and Peace Building Initiatives.” Since then, peace-building course has been offered to students. In addition to a formal course, there is also a peace-building club as one of students’ activity groups. This essay is written based on the experiences of both the course and the students’ activity group.

Interfaith Dialogue through Peacebuilding Course

Petra Christian University takes the efforts to help increase inter-religious understanding and develop peace building initiatives. As pointed out above, a peace-building course was started from a research conducted by the Center for Chinese-Indonesian Studies (CCIS) in PCU. The research tried to map out the potential problems that could lead to ethno-religious conflicts and to propose the possible solution of those problems by inviting people from different ethnic and religious background as participants. The participants were all students, except one, who are Chinese and Non-Chinese, Christian and Muslim background in Surabaya. Ethnic conflicts in Indonesia usually are rooted in the frictions between Chinese – Non-Chinese relation (although there are also conflicts among the indigenous ethnic groups in Indonesia), and the religious conflicts are usually between the Christians and the Muslims.⁷

The recommendation to reduce negative stereotyping of people from other groups is to build good communication. ‘Reverse stereotyping’ should be encouraged by highlighting the positive attributes of people belonging to other groups.⁸ This can happen through dialogue.

The majority of both students and faculty members of Petra Christian University are Christian and Chinese descent. Socially, PCU is a homogeneous society. It is crucial to design meeting point with other ethnicities and religions. Since 2012 PCU General Studies Department has offered Peace-building course as an elective course. Students who join this

⁶ Kuntjara, Esther. (1993). “Promoting Peace in Christian Higher Education.” *Acuca Exchange*. Quezon City: Acuca, Vol. III No.1, June 1993, p. 111-120

⁷ Kuntjara, *Project Report*.

⁸ *Idem*.

course come from various religions and ethnicities. The course is designed for a service learning one. The syllabi consist of topic about peace (definition, values), conflict, conflict resolution, and field trip. It also prepares the students to do service learning. The students are divided into interdisciplinary study groups. Based on their capacity, they plan social services to communities from different ethnic and religious background. Service learning is an effective tool to build an interfaith dialogue. According to Swidler, there are three things that can be done by interfaith dialogue: (1) practical: collaboration of people to help each other for humanitarian affair, (2) spiritual: trying to experience ideology or religion of others, (3) cognitive: trying to understand the beliefs of others.⁹

In several community services that had been done, the students taught peace values at private and government schools as an additional lesson in character building class; helped children learn English, and taught peace values through story-telling in slum areas. Even though they had different faith, they had the same goal, namely, helping others. If they experience conflict within their group, it is not because of their religions, but because of their personal character traits.

Another activity that had been carried on was a field-trip. The students went to Balun village known as Pancasila village in East Java. This village is unique because it has three houses of worship (mosque, pura, and church) built closely to each other. The students learned how the spiritual leaders in that area manage conflicts among themselves in peace. For example, on one occasion, the Moslems and Christians celebrated their religious festivities on the same day. There would be a problem about the parking area if both did it at the same time. To solve this problem, the leaders decided to celebrate their festivities in different time.

Peace-building course has changed students' perceptions about others. In term of interreligious dialogue, there is now an interreligious understanding built within them. Though each has different background, they can sit together and discuss the same issue on how to empower the communities. They share similar peace values (compassion, equality, interdependence, diversity, and nonviolence) to be implemented among them and in society.

⁹ Udasmoro, Wening, *et al.* (2013). *Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat "Grass Root" Merajut Dialog Antar Iman*. Yogyakarta: Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), p. ix.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE THROUGH PEACEBUILDING STUDENTS' ACTIVITY UNIT

Nevertheless, after some time, we realized that teaching peace-building in a formal classroom context was not enough. It was true that there was a field-trip and service learning, but it was only two (2) credits. That is why, it is not enough for the students to be able to implement the peace values holistically.

We should follow it up with the non-formal context. Therefore, in 2012, the Peace-building Student Activity Unit was launched as one of student activity units in PCU under the University Student Council. It aims to train students to make peace activities as their life skills. It also becomes the meeting place for them to live peacefully in which they learn how to respond to differences, to see the positive sides of conflict, and to solve the problems wisely. The peace values which are developed like justice, honesty, truth, equality, tolerance, care, and respect will hopefully transform them to be trusted peacemakers.

Through these activities, the students learn to organize not only their understanding (head) and spirituality (heart) but also their skills (hands) as a peacemaker starting from themselves. In order to develop their *heart* (spirituality), they are taught to build a good relationship with God, the Creator. Besides, they are also trained to build relations, empathy and care for others. In order to develop the *head*, they are trained to think critically, especially in dealing with social issues that happen in daily-life situations like bullying and other various kinds of violence. They also learn to practice self-management by being wise in using the resources to organize food, but also to use simple utensils while eating and to produce a minimum kind of left-overs. Meanwhile to develop their *hands*, they learn social skills, communication, cooperation, dealing with differences and conflicts, but also giving, working, and leading in teams and in committees that work for the community services.

In the interfaith dialogue, the participants are trained to deal with differences in theology and to appreciate and understand the differences in doctrines. Initially, they were given the materials on prejudice as from the above research we learned that the main cause for religious conflicts is prejudice about the others' religions. The participants were encouraged to state their opinions about other religions as a way to deconstruct their worldview. They were then asked to think critically about that prejudice. It is common for the participants to learn along the process that the reality is not in accordance with their initial prejudice. Therefore they can start being fairer: not having a negative stereotype on those from a particular religion. After arriving at this stage, the students begin to reconstruct their perspectives about those from different religions.

Another form of interfaith dialogue that we had conducted was discussing the same topic from the Qur'an and the Bible. A chosen topic was about love towards God and the others seen from the perspective of the Qur'an and the Bible. We tried to find the common ground from this activity. In addition to this, we also discussed about the prophets which became an opportunity for the students learn about the others' theology. We also visited different places of worship and had open dialogues with various religious leaders.

In addition to those activities, the students also joined the students' interfaith camp whose participants consisted of Christians and Moslems. There was an occurrence in this interfaith camp in which a Moslem participant turned out not to have even one Christian friends in all his life. He only knows about Christians and Christianity from the internet. However, the information that he read was only the negative ones. For instance, he read about the Christians who look down on his respected prophet. Therefore he disliked and even hated Christians.

Eventually he learned in that camp that the Christians are not like what he thought in all this time. He was telling his story by shedding tears, showing a deep remorse but also a relief that he finally be freed from negative prejudice about the Christians.

On the other hands, Christian students are often not allowed to go to such a camp by their parents because they think that Moslems are evil and mostly terrorists so they do not want their children to be in trouble. These experiences show that adherents of both religions have a strong prejudice towards each other that hamper them from having deep interactions and peaceful living. These situations also show that prejudice needs to be deconstructed and then reconstructed.

Another interesting occurrence from this interfaith dialogue took place when PCU students, together with other institutions in Surabaya and Madura, visited the Maduranese Syiah refugee's camp in Sidoarjo. The Syiah and Sunni conflicts have nothing to do with the PCU students' ethnicity and religion but they could see this as a humanitarian issue. We went there in order to celebrate the International Day of Peace on September 21 2013.

Many of the PCU students have negative stereotypes about the Maduranese: they are rough and not easy to accept others. This view changed when they visited the refugee's camp.

It turned out that the students were openly welcomed by the Maduranese. These people were so kind, friendly, and warm; a fact that surprised the PCU students who consisted of mostly Chinese and Christians. In this visit, the students donated some funds collected from other students at their campuses.

One kind of fear from the interfaith dialogue is the fear of being a heretic. The Moslems worried that the interfaith dialogue will influence them to change their religion. The Christians

have similar fear. However, it was not the case in reality. The students who conducted a dialogue about their faith found themselves grow as they become eager to study deeper about their own faith. They were challenged to explain well about their faith to their friends who come from different religions.

CONCLUSION

Within the interreligious relations there was a history of distrust due to various historical factors. It is very important to rebuild the trust as we cannot live in peace if we neglect the efforts to understand those different from us. Peace education can function as a bridge that prepares the students to have the life skills for that rebuilding. In order to reach that purpose, the contents and methods of peace education should be adjusted to the context of the participants. Based on the context of PCU, interfaith dialog turns out to be an effective way to build understanding and trust. Hopefully this sharing of experiences can enrich the horizons of peace education conducted within the context of higher educational institution.

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