Resource 13: An introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies

This extract is taken from the introduction to the International Baccalaureate course, Peace and Conflict Studies*, from Atlantic College, Wales.*

The need for the study of 'Peace and Conflict' is necessary in an age characterised by division, and violence.

The general objectives of Atlantic College can be well served by a course that examines conflict at all levels, personal, social and international and seeks peaceful solutions to them. In recent years research has provided the necessary tools for improved understanding of conflict and its transformation towards peace rather than violence.

Peace and Conflict Studies demands a multi-disciplinary approach, combining elements of subjects such as history, economics, politics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The course is 'value based' in so far as it encourages peace rather than violence, but the intention is not to pacify you as students or persuade you to ignore or avoid conflict. Indeed the subject, Peace and Conflict Studies will concern itself to a large extent with the analysis of conflict and violence, since only by understanding those phenomena can you learn how they might be reduced or eliminated. For the purposes of this course the term conflict is used in a sense broader than that of open violence or warfare. Conflict can and should be seen as a necessary and positive aspect of change and development and it is therefore imperative to learn about it because when mismanaged it can lead to destructive violence. Traditionally peace has been understood as the absence of war. Peace Research, however, has suggested strongly that there are two complementary concepts of peace. The absence of war and direct violence, sometimes referred to as negative peace, is the first fundamental condition for a step towards the achievement of positive peace. The latter is based on notions of justice, liberty, equality and co-operation, although of course these terms themselves are open to many definitions and interpretations. Progress towards peace is therefore a dynamic process, a movement first towards the absence of war and violence and then towards genuine, lasting, positive peace.

The subject mirrors many of the UWC [United World Colleges] ideals and should give you a better understanding of the world around you. During your two years you will study eight topics.

1. Understanding the concepts of 'Peace', 'Conflict' and 'Violence'.
2. The causes of human aggression and the causes of war.
3. Inter-group conflict – causes and reduction of prejudice and discrimination.
4. The arms trade, armament and disarmament.
5. Northern prosperity and violence against the economically under-developed South.
6. Regions in Conflict (Your own study of a regional conflict).
7. International Organisations: The UN mediation and conflict management.
8. Positive Action: The power of non-violence in place of war and violent conflict.

You will learn through classroom teaching, reading and most importantly, informed discussion and debate. You will be assessed throughout the course both orally and in writing (50%) and in a final exam at the end of your second year (50%).

It is not a subject of certainties and you will not be able to learn facts and produce them under exam conditions to score a high grade. If this is the kind of learning you enjoy then this subject is not for you. Instead you will be exploring ideas and examining theories which have been put forward to explain the complexities of human behaviour. You will consider practical measures that can be applied to transform conflict positively towards peace rather than into a spiral of violence. You will need to reach your own conclusions from the evidence presented and you will have to develop the skills of persuasive communication both orally and in writing. It is a study of the ever-changing world today, from the individual and interpersonal to the international level, and of how and why humanity succeeds and fails to live in peace and harmony. We certainly will not find all the answers but it is interesting to try!