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Teaching peace by using nonviolent communication for difficult conversations in the college classroom

Abstract

Having empathy and respect for oneself and others when engaging in difficult dialogue is an essential part of peace education. Gandhi emphasized that involving emotions was more transformative than purely intellectual approaches to education. Nonviolent communication (NVC), as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is a tool for fostering empathy and building connection across difference. Using NVC for difficult conversations in any college classroom is a way of mainstreaming peace education across the curriculum. Though there is literature on difficult conversations in the college classroom, and on the effectiveness of NVC in general and in K-12 classrooms, there is very little on NVC in college spaces, and none on NVC for difficult conversations. In this primarily qualitative study college students were asked to use NVC to discuss controversial nonviolent actions. We found that even when both professor and students were NVC beginners, students were able to use it to discuss polarizing protests in a class with a diversity of views and needs for respect were overwhelmingly met. NVC was also useful for deepening analysis of the effectiveness of nonviolent actions, and could serve as a tool of emotional regulation for nonviolent action, or a modern day sort of purification for satyagraha.

Keywords: *Nonviolent communication, nonviolence, difficult conversations, college classroom, Kent State, scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL)*

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Laine Seliga is a fourth-year PhD candidate and instructor in the Department of Political Science at Kent State University. Her doctoral research investigates how gender identities and roles are negotiated and constructed within UN discourse. She is interested in deconstructing existing conceptualizations about gender using feminist post-structural perspectives and exploring alternative constructions that address the need to improve international and national-level responses to post-conflict peacebuilding.

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Teaching Peace by Using Nonviolent Communication for

Difficult Conversations in the College Classroom

Sara Koopman and Laine Seliga

Having empathy and respect for oneself and others when engaging in difficult dialogue is an essential part of peace education. Gandhi emphasized that involving emotions was more transformative than purely intellectual approaches to education (Allen, 2007). Nonviolent communication (NVC), as developed by Marshall Rosenberg (2003), is a tool for fostering empathy and building connection across difference. As such, using NVC for difficult conversations in any college classroom is a way of mainstreaming peace education across the curriculum. Though there is literature on difficult conversations in the college classroom, and on the effectiveness of NVC in general and in K-12 classrooms, there is very little on NVC in college spaces, and none on NVC for navigating difficult conversations in these spaces. We aim to encourage this use and exploration with this small and primarily qualitative study where college students were asked to use NVC to discuss controversial nonviolent actions. Today's polarized political climate makes teaching about the uses of nonviolent action to build peace all the more essential, but also potentially more explosive. Discussing controversial actions, like athletes kneeling against police brutality or rallies for the right to carry guns to class, can lead to heated conversations that do not meet students' needs for respect. NVC is a tool for removing judgments from these conversations and building connection across difference. We found that even though both professor and students were NVC beginners, students were able to use it to discuss polarizing protests in a class with a diversity of views and needs for respect were overwhelmingly met. NVC was also useful for deepening analysis of the effectiveness of nonviolent actions and could potentially serve as a tool of emotional regulation for nonviolent action, or a modern-day sort of purification for satyagraha.

The context of any study is relevant, but the context of this one is particularly weighty. Kent State is a symbol of the constitutional right to protest, embodying what can happen when it is lost. On May 1, 1970, then U.S. President Nixon expanded the war from Vietnam to Cambodia. Protests erupted that day across the United States, including at Kent State where students expressed their outrage by burying the U.S. Constitution (Barbato et al., 2013). Later that night, students protested by breaking windows in town of sites like banks that students saw as symbolically associated with the war (Canfora, 2019). On Saturday, May 2nd, just as some

students were attempting to light the ROTC building on fire in protest (as had been done at many other campuses), nearly 1000 National Guard troops rolled onto campus with tanks. They put the campus effectively on lockdown, with soldiers in front of every dormitory. The ROTC building did burn later that night, when students say they were no longer there (Canfora, 2019). Students continued to protest, and on Sunday evening, May 3rd, several were bayoneted by the Guard as they dispersed from a sit-in. On May 4th, students gathered to protest both the war and the occupation of campus. Only one student managed to speak, simply asking if students were willing to strike—to which chants of student strike began, before the Guard advanced. When students refused to disperse, the Guard used tear gas and pushed students up and over the hill. Thirty-six minutes later, as students were dispersing across a parking lot and the guard was moving away, one unit of twelve guardsmen turned back and aimed in unison towards the students. They fired 67 shots over thirteen long seconds, killing four students and wounding nine, leaving one paralyzed. The Vietnam War had come home. Students across the United States responded with the largest student strike in U.S. history, with 4,350,000 students shutting down 2,551 colleges and universities—more than half of those in the United States. Outrage in response to the shooting helped to end the war (Barbato et al., 2013, p. 30).

The School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State was established soon after the shooting as a living memorial to the martyred students. First as the Center for Peaceful Change, later named the Center for Applied Conflict Management; it was recently upgraded to a School for its 50th anniversary. One of the authors (Koopman) began teaching at Kent State 2017 and was assigned to teach *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*. I (Koopman) naively expected Kent State students to understand and support the right to protest. I was shocked when discussions of athletes kneeling against police brutality (the major nonviolent action in the news that semester) became extremely heated, with some students expressing rage and even hatred towards the athletes. Having just moved back to the United States after 14 years away, I was unprepared and did not handle the conversations as I would have liked. I was particularly disturbed that Black students were uncomfortable speaking or even coming back to class. Despite various attempts to change the dynamics during that semester, and discuss issues in different ways, the atmosphere remained tense. Some students made it clear that their needs for respect were not met in the class, nor were my own.

A classroom does not always need to be comfortable. Indeed, if the course material questions dominant power relations, those with some privilege will likely be uncomfortable (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2011). But to begin the transformations needed to build a positive peace by connecting across difference, it is important that, as possible, everyone's needs for respect and empathy are met. NVC is a useful tool for this, as it aims to remove the judgment and distancing embedded in most communication (Rosenberg, 2015).

In the next iteration of the course I (Koopman) decided to do primary research on the class. I wanted to see if the tool of NVC would be useful in difficult discussions of controversial nonviolent actions. Seliga joined the project in Fall 2018 as the graduate assistant for the course. This was officially a third-year class, though there were some students from each year. There were 26 students, and all but two were either majors or minors in the program. Four were people of color. In both ways this was quite similar to the previous iteration of the course. Only one student had prior experience with NVC (having learned it from Koopman in another class). All but two consented to participate in the research.

We knew that there would be controversial protests happening during the semester, and indeed, we discussed one repeatedly in class, both in the weeks leading up to it and following. In 2019, the previous spring, Kaitlin Bennett received national media attention for a viral tweet (see figure 1). She had organized several open carry rallies as a student, where non-students marched around campus with guns. She organized a much larger one in Fall 2019 that received national attention through her job as a reporter at the alt-right site InfoWars. The goal seemed to be to march to the site of the 1970 student massacre and pose there for the media with assault rifles. Bennett announced that Joey Gibson of Patriot Prayer would attend, a national alt-right figure charged with inciting violence at other events. Members of the Proud Boys and the American Guard said online that they would be at the march. In the end Gibson did not come, and there was no open presence of the Proud Boys, but one of us (Koopman) saw a group of

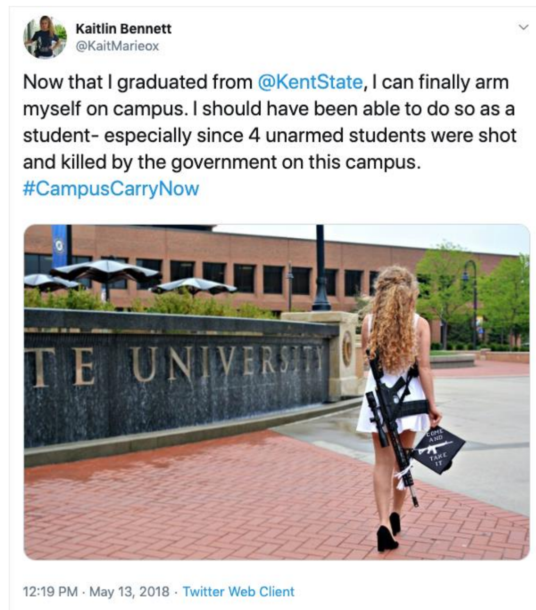

Figure 1 tweet by Kaitlin Bennett

eight men wearing black t-shirts that said American Guard, a group identified as a White supremacist militia by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and particularly painful on a campus that was occupied by the National Guard. There were also three men wearing desert combat gear, including bulletproof vests and numerous assault rifles each, who identified themselves to the media as the 3% Militia (a group also identified as a White supremacist militia by SPLC).

In response to the expected White supremacist presence, anti-fascists took a lead role in organizing a counter-protest with the explicit intention of keeping the gun rally away from the massacre site (which they succeeded in doing). The campus was heavily militarized by well over a hundred campus and local police officers, and most visibly 300 to 400 state troopers, many in riot gear (see figure 2). There were police snipers on tall buildings around the plaza where the counterprotest gathered. This sort of militarization of campus is disconcerting for Kent State, where the students killed in 1970 were protesting not only the expansion of the Vietnam War, but also the occupation of campus by the National Guard.

Figure 2 State troopers in riot gear on Kent State campus, photo by John Conley, Kent Wired, used with permission

This was an emotionally charged protest that electrified the campus for weeks. Why discuss it in the classroom? One of the crucial dialogue skills peace education can teach is how to have difficult conversations in ways that build empathy and connection across difference. Gandhi emphasized that involving emotions in education was key, and that peace education should change habitual patterns of fear and insecurity (Allen, 2007). Changing such ways of responding, particularly the othering that justifies violence, can in itself be transformative and build peace in society. We found that teaching college students NVC skills made it possible to do this, in that it helped us have difficult conversations about nonviolent protest in ways that met

needs for respect. We also found that it served to deepen their understanding of the nonviolent action dynamics that can be used to build a just peace.

This article begins by presenting the basics of the NVC technique. It then turns to the literature and the gap that we address with our research. There is a scarcity of research on the effectiveness of NVC in the college classroom, and for difficult conversations in any classroom. We then present how NVC was taught in this class, followed by the results of our primary research on its impact and the key lessons learned from this exercise. The article ends with a broader discussion of how and why using NVC to foster respect during difficult conversations in the college classroom contributes to peace education, whether or not it is done in a peace studies class.

The NVC Technique

Nonviolent communication is a technique developed by Marshall Rosenberg (2003) with four basic steps that are used either for giving empathy to oneself or another:

1. **Observations** without evaluation (when I see/hear … / when you see/hear …)
2. **Feelings** separated from thoughts (I feel … / are you feeling …)
3. **Needs** and values separated from strategies (I need ... / are you needing …)
4. **Requests** instead of demands (Please, could you …/ Would you like …)

Rosenberg teaches that it can also work with just the basic two steps of either asking about or expressing feelings and needs. To do this, it can be helpful to use charts of universal human feelings and needs, such as:

- **Feelings:** afraid, annoyed, angry, disgusted, confused, upset, embarrassed, hurt, sad, tense;
- **Needs:** connection, respect, honesty, trust, safety, ease, autonomy, meaning, learning.

There are many long lists of feelings and needs used for NVC available online; we used the ones at groktheworld.com, but they never rank needs as Maslow's hierarchy does. The assumption is that all human beings share and will relate to each other's yearning for needs like respect and dignity, and that this will build connection (Koopman & Knight, 2019).

Naming a feeling, either your own or that of another, can be surprisingly hard to do. In recent years it has become much more common in the United States to say "I feel *like*" followed by what is not a feeling but a thought, such as "this class is hard." The other pitfall is to use *faux feelings* that blame the other person and are likely to lead to defensiveness and distance. These

judgment terms are often confused with feelings, such as disrespected, attacked, or blamed. NVC asks you instead to translate such judgments into feelings and unmet needs such as, for those three, upset and valuing respect, scared and wanting safety, angry and needing understanding. There is a useful tool for these translations at nvcatwork.com/efn. A great resource for both learning these steps and teaching them are the videos at cupofempathy.com. There are more formal trainings at cnvc.org and nvctraining.com.

Again, the four steps of NVC are used to offer empathy, but not in the common sense understanding of it as *walking in their shoes*, where one projects one's own sense of what an experience would be like on to another, thereby erasing and even consuming the other, as Boler (1997) argues. In NVC you might use your imagination of what an experience would be like to guess at potential feelings, but nothing is assumed. Instead, giving empathy involves a back-and-forth process as the giver guesses at various possibilities and the receiver clarifies the feelings and needs at play.

NVC is a tool for building relationships based on understanding and compassion. As the book we used to teach NVC in this class claims in its very title, it can foster connection across difference and build common ground (Connor & Killian, 2012). It helps us to connect with our own and each other's humanity (Kashtan & Kashtan, n.d.). Rosenberg (2003) suggests that it can break the cycle of defensiveness created by aggressive thinking and moralistic judgment. It is a form of nonviolence in the sense that it works against the structural violence inherent in and fostered by our forms of communication, without itself using such violence.

The Impact and Efficacy of NVC

Rosenberg (2003) developed the first version of NVC in 1972 and by 1999 had developed it into its current form of observations, feelings, needs and requests. NVC has since been studied by different disciplines and used in many environments and although empirical investigation into the model's impact remains sparse, most studies indicate some positive effect from learning or applying the NVC model on building empathy (Altmann, 2013; Blake, 2002; Costetti, 2000; Jones, 2009; Little, 2008; Nosek et al., 2014), improving communication (Beard et al., 2009; Bonnell et al., 2017; Branscomb, 2011; Cox & Dannahy, 2005; Steckal, 1994), decreasing conflict (Hart & Göthlin, 2002; Ignjatovic-Savic, 1996; Nash, 2007), and increasing collaborative connection (Burleson et al., 2012; Connor & Wentworth, 2012; Hooper, 2015).

Peer-reviewed studies on the impact and efficacy of NVC tend to emphasize the fields of public health, conflict resolution, and education. The successful use of NVC has been documented in parole populations and prison inmates, corporate organizations, healthcare, and in classrooms with young children through university students. Moreover, the results are consistent: NVC training and implementation leads to positive increases in empathy; inter- and intra-personal communication; supportive relationships; and constructive approaches to conflict. The literature shows that in the short-term, NVC training is more likely to lead to positive increases in empathy and individual communication skills whereas long-term use of NVC shows improvement in attitudes toward conflict and greater potential for mutually satisfying conflict outcomes.

Large-scale studies on the general population support that NVC training is easily adopted and its effect on empathy, positive and measurable in the short-term. In just hours, studies have shown that participants trained in NVC reported having more honesty and empathy (Costetti, 2000; Little, 2008) as well as a greater awareness of feelings and needs (McCain, 2014). Over the course of a few days, NVC training began to affect interpersonal communication. Beard et al. (2009) found that 557 young doctors instructed in NVC techniques over two days increased their self-perceived communication skills from a median of 4.2. to 8.1 (10-point scale). In her master's thesis, Blake (2002) found that while a two-day training in NVC could not be isolated as the contributing factor, college students (18-29) reported being more receptive to positive interpersonal communication and decreased verbal aggression. After six days, a study of 552 teachers and over 9380 students demonstrated a grasp of the principles of nonviolence, self-respect, responsibility, equality, and compassion (Ignjatovic-Savic, 1996).

After a few weeks, data supports that participants begin to see conflict as a tool for enhancing relationships. Branscomb (2011) found that after two weeks participants reported having better self-control of their anger as well as greater compassion for others. Burleson et al. (2012) found that over 94% (n = 65) of respondents to a survey one week after a three-day workshop reported that NVC instilled feelings of comradery with others, but also changed the way in which they navigated their feelings and needs with respect to the world around them. This shift in awareness from intra- to interpersonal concern is also measured by fewer conflicts among NVC trainees; increased listening and community participation; and better conflict mediation (Fullerton, 2009; Hart & Göthlin, 2002; Jones, 2009; Kelso, 2005).

This psychological shift is more apparent in the long-term. There is quantitative support that participants who study NVC maintain a more relational definition of peace and can better recall peace concepts and role models one year after training (Baesler & Lauricella, 2014). This suggests NVC fosters lasting change in attitudes about peace and positive communication among those trained in its techniques. For example, a quantitative study of business executives showed that after six months in NVC training corporation efficiency increased by 50-80% (Connor & Wentworth, 2012). This paralleled an increase in the executive's ability to have empathy for others in addition to increased self-empathy in the short-term. Similarly, Little et al. (2007) found a dramatic increase in positive communication skills compared to a control group that showed no significant change three months after NVC training concluded.

Long-term effects of NVC training also include an increased ability to resolve conflict peacefully (Branscomb, 2011; Nash, 2007) and the lasting establishment of positive social support networks (Marlow et al., 2012). Nash (2007) held a two-year training program on NVC for staff members at a juvenile treatment center in Virginia and found a statistically significant increase in peaceful conflict resolution between staff and residents as training continued. Contrarily, the staff untrained in NVC increased their rate of violent conflict resolution. Suarez et al. (2014) also studied the use of NVC in the prison population and found that as prisoners increased their NVC training hours, rates of recidivism correspondingly decreased. Like in short-term studies, long-term studies document participants' desire to collaborate and share NVC techniques with others (Altmann, 2010; Burleson et al., 2012; Hooper, 2015), although a survey by Bonnell et al. (2017) suggests that it is important "that enough people within an organization, including management, are trained in NVC to allow for it to become a shared language" (p. viii).

Overall, there is the potential for NVC to foster connection, trust, and empathy—key elements for transformative peace education at any age. There are arguments increasingly made that academics have a responsibility to create a space for difficult dialogue in the classroom (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018), and other tools have also been put forward for facilitating these conversations. While these authors do not explicitly mention NVC, many of the same principles are put to use with similar success.

NVC Alternatives

There are other models of communication that incorporate empathy due to its record of success in fostering open and honest communication. Landis (2008) pioneered "Difficult

Dialogue" workshops to address the tensions that might arise from discussing controversial topics. The authors report great success using communication techniques similar to NVC to, as they put it "encounter" and "engage" with controversy. In their book on how to talk about hot topics on campus, Nash et al. (2008) argue for what they call "moral conversation," a broader process without specific steps (and again no mention of NVC) but which aims to humanize through sharing personal stories and creating mutual vulnerability. They share the concern of a Black activist student that this process will "cool out" righteous indignation with racism, and that empathy is unrealistic in the face of oppression (pp. 31-32). They argue in response that though the classroom may not be the space where action against injustice will occur, shifting what is often an adversarial exchange of ideas to one that seeks to find common ground can be transformative.

Without specifically mentioning NVC, Alvarez (2016) argues for what she calls "open communication" for difficult conversations in culturally diverse classrooms. She notes that by creating ground rules for discussion based in trust and safety classroom discussion becomes a place where "empathetic engagement" occurs. This allows students to avoid stereotyping others and equips them to better navigate different cultural narratives in their assignments and discussion. Agnew (2012) found it effective to implement an "ethos of conversation" in the classroom. During her time as a religious ethics professor, Agnew found that focusing on meeting students' needs helped uncover needs for more accessible scholarship and needs for emotional safety and belonging that were being obscured by a lack of participation in class. This approach incorporates and is informed by NVC but addresses the vulnerability students feel when confronted with information that may counter their religious commitments and personal identities. Her anecdotal evidence shows such an approach reduces peer-conflict during ethical conversations by emphasizing students' needs for safety, respect, and belonging (Agnew, 2012).

Though these are kindred approaches, we chose to use NVC specifically in this class because it has clearer and more accessible steps to teach and take than these others. Most universities have a Center for Teaching and Learning (or one with a similar name) that helps faculty with teaching skills. Many of these have pages about handling difficult conversations in the college classroom (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Indiana University Bloomington, n.d.; Landis, 2008; *Theory Into Practice Strategies: Inclusive Practices for Managing Controversial Issues*, n.d.; Vogelsang & McGee, 2015; Volk, 2016). A review of

these found none that mentioned the use of NVC for this purpose, other than the one Koopman developed (Koopman & Knight, 2019) which offers quick and easy ways to use basic NVC for this. That has led to NVC being taught in large nursing and education classes at Kent State.

NVC and Difficult Dialogue

The gap that remains to be addressed in the literature is whether NVC is a useful tool for navigating difficult discussion. There are ethnographic reports on how NVC can foster empathic communication during conversation by creating space for students to intentionally and mindfully recognize the everyday violence around them (Baesler, 2017). Most narrative accounts, however, fail to mention whether the techniques were effective or had an impact beyond the classroom.

Lauricella (2019) recently developed a set of best practices for teaching an undergraduate course in NVC and notes that students greatly enjoy the “respectful dialogue and debate” (p. 107) that results from incorporating NVC into their discussions. Lauricella, however, mentions nothing about using NVC specifically for less enjoyable, or more difficult conversations, although the topics addressed in her class are social issues that could arguably create such moments. Unfortunately, Lauricella does not address instances in which discussion became heated or tense.

Additionally, researchers have examined how NVC training can help students understand historical peace events (Baesler & Lauricella, 2014), navigate difficult political situations (Kok, 2007), and political debates (Albe & Gombert, 2012), but to our knowledge no work has explored the use of NVC to discuss controversial issues in the college classroom. Though Connor and Killian (2012), the text we used in our class, appears aimed at college students it does not discuss using NVC in the college classroom, nor for politically charged conversations in or outside of the classroom. This is a notable gap in the literature that we address with our research here. We believe NVC is useful in any college classroom, but we found it to be particularly apt for classes on nonviolence itself.

Limitations of NVC

Several studies address potential limitations of NVC. All but one critique stems from qualitative focus groups or survey results. In a quasi-experimental design, Altmann (2010) found that post-tests could not adequately measure the depth of self-realization that the qualitative results described. Some participants note that it was sometimes embarrassing to use NVC, especially when asked to practice the techniques with strangers (Altmann, 2010). This

corresponds with participants finding it easier to practice NVC with close family and friends (Bonnell et al., 2017).

Other studies note that participants find NVC concepts easy to grasp but much harder to put into practice, especially when it comes to stressful real-life problems (Burleson et al., 2012; Nosek & Durán, 2017). As one critique stated, this could be because feelings and needs can often be difficult to identify and require trust between parties to share openly (Burleson et al., 2012). Even if one can identify feelings and needs, the unique communication style of NVC can feel awkward to use, especially around those unfamiliar with the model (Nosek & Durán, 2017).

Finally, it takes time, practice, and money to hone the skills necessary to use NVC in everyday life, resources which many participants could not devote during the limited span of many studies (Altmann, 2010; Nosek et al., 2014). Communication habits are engrained early, and it is difficult to adopt a new style of thinking and speaking (Nosek & Durán, 2017). However, after learning about NVC many participants express a willingness to continue to engage with NVC in the future (McCain, 2014).

Using NVC in a College Class on Nonviolence

Doing our study at Kent State shaped the research in various ways. Nationally Kent State seems to still have some reputation of radical student activism, based on the legacy of the 70s. However, direct action these days is actually fairly minimal, and is often for conservative causes such as the right to openly carry guns to class. One might expect students in Peace and Conflict Studies to be more liberal and active in social justice causes, as indeed Koopman did, being new to campus and to Peace Studies and having that background herself. But some students in Peace and Conflict Studies regularly express support for traditionally conservative causes and politicians in class. Koopman was likewise surprised that many of the majors in the program want to be police officers (one in this class was an active officer), military personnel, or work in human resources in contrast to career paths she expected of a peace and development practitioner or social justice advocate. Another important context of this class is that at Kent some rural White students have never met a Black person until university. It is not clear if this was true in either of these classes, but it gives a sense of how new and difficult discussions about race can be for some. Students also said that they were unused to class discussions generally, and to an active learning classroom with no PowerPoint slides, on a campus where many professors lecture or in

other ways present as the sage on the stage rather than the guide on the side. The literature points to students initially being hostile to this format. Most students were also new to the idea of active nonviolence and repeatedly confused it with simply the absence of violence.

This was primarily a qualitative study that also incorporated some quantitative measures in surveys. On the second day of class a staff person from the Center for Teaching and Learning came in and described the research, made it clear that participation would be entirely separate from grading, and collected release forms (two of the 26 chose not to consent). That day, students took a short online survey on their phones. They then received three weeks of basic training in NVC. The primary text used was Connor and Killian (2012), and they were assigned the first half of the book and given weekly quizzes which they answered online on Blackboard before class. Students were asked to take another survey at the end of those three weeks. Throughout the rest of the semester, students were asked to use NVC in class discussions. Particular effort was made to use NVC to discuss breaking controversial nonviolent actions. Throughout the entire semester Seliga took detailed ethnographic notes on the dynamics of each class, and Koopman took detailed reflective notes after teaching each class. We met after each class to discuss, and also commented in writing on each other's written reflections on each class. Seliga also wrote reflections on how NVC shaped student's written assignments. Students were surveyed again at the end of the semester with a third and different survey. All surveys and quizzes had open-ended questions along with multiple choice and Likert scale questions. Neither were repetitive; that is they were not the typical pretest/post-test widely used in educational research, as the aim was a more qualitative inquiry into student's own take on the experience and its value (Duckworth et al., 2012).

Duckworth et al. (2012) argue that there has been a dearth of qualitative research in peace education but that it can result in a "deeper, richer, and more useful picture of the transformative changes (if any) that may have occurred within a student" (p. 85). They contrast this with simply measuring whether a particular skill was learned. While in this case we did look at both the students' and the professor's ability to use NVC, it was part of a larger examination of what work NVC can do in the college classroom and the impact it can have on both students and professors. This broader exploratory qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given that this is the first study to address this gap in the literature and was done with a small group of students. This research does not aim to offer any definitive or purportedly objective God's eye

view but rather is explicitly situated knowledge, both *about* difficult conversations and also aimed at *engaging* in non-innocent conversation, as Haraway (1988) puts it, across our various partial perspectives on peace education.

Study Results

The initial research question was: Does teaching and using NVC help students discuss controversial protests? More specifically, how do students feel about using this tool for difficult discussions? Does this tool help to meet their need for respect during those discussions? The emphasis on feelings and needs in the research questions mirrors the emphasis on these in NVC itself. Surprisingly to us, in the initial survey, given before we taught NVC, 80% of students (19 of 24) said that they felt either moderately or quite comfortable discussing politically controversial subjects with their peers. As such we emphasized meeting the need for respect in the teaching and the research, while keeping comfort in mind.

Various tools were then used to teach NVC. We showed several short videos. We gave students two handouts in plastic sleeves. One listed feelings and included a small box, listing perceptions that are sometimes confused with needs (such as criticized, disrespected). The other contained a list of needs. Students were asked to always bring these to class and occasionally asked to pull them out for exercises. After several exercises with the charts in hand, one student asked if we could do it without the charts, because "having the feelings and needs list in front of you slows you down and interrupts the flow of conversation." In response we shifted to an exercise where two students would practice without using the charts, but a third student would watch and coach them, holding the charts and suggesting possible feelings and needs when they seemed stuck. They then debriefed and switched roles. This worked well.

Another process that worked well was used for a discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* costume protests against the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings and Trump's comment afterwards that "it's embarrassing for the country to allow protesters" (Cilliza, 2018). After watching a video of the protests (*"Handmaids" Protest Kavanaugh Confirmation*, 2018), students were asked to pause and look at the charts, write down their own feelings and needs, and then set them aside to really listen and focus on their exercise partner. A website that translates judgment terms into feelings (nvcatwork.com/apps) was briefly introduced but not explicitly required in any exercise or assignment. This may have been easier to do using the handout version of such translations (Kiley, n.d.).

Large cards with different feelings and needs on each (available at https://www.groktheworld.com/big-grok-trainers-educators-facilitators-therapists) were also used to practice NVC in the style of a game. We gave every student one feeling card and one need card. One student stood at the front of the class and told a story about a conflict they had faced, such as with a roommate or a parent. If classmates thought the storyteller had experienced the feeling on the card in front of them, they would raise it, and if the storyteller thought it was accurate, they would take a step forward. The same was then done for needs, until the teller was in the middle of the class. Students enjoyed this but it could be overwhelming for the teller when many options were offered. This can be addressed by limiting it to one feeling offered at a time, until three are correct.

Because we introduced NVC in this class as a way to foster respect in discussions of protests, the first practice we gave students was a political issue. Legalizing marijuana and gun control were offered as sample topics and if students who paired off agreed on both, they were asked to role play as if they had different positions. Many students agreed and had trouble pretending not to. It would have perhaps been better to ask them to give each other NVC style empathy even if they agreed, so that they could see that they might have different reasons for their position and that compassion and understanding could still be useful. This would have also helped them see that this method is not meant for convincing someone of your position in an argument, but for building connection. This seemed to be a common misconception, and even Seliga's field notes for this class described these as arguments. Students said that they would have preferred to practice first with a personal dispute scenario, such as dirty dishes issues with a roommate. They also asked for more sample language, and it would help to offer them a handout with phrases they could try, such as options for a simple connection request at the end like "Did I get that right?" or, "Can you tell me what you heard me say?"

In the second survey, given immediately after the three weeks of training on NVC at the beginning of the semester, 85% (20 of 23) said NVC seemed quite or moderately useful for transforming personal conflicts (the examples given were a disagreement with a roommate about the dishes or parents about car use), and that they had already used it outside of class. However, when asked "How useful does NVC seem to you for transforming political conflicts, such as whether and what sort of protest should be legal? (based on the practice sessions in class)" Thirteen percent (3 of 23) thought it would not be and 46% (10 of 23) were undecided.

Comments about why included it being difficult and awkward, and still needing more practice to get the hang of it. In the weekly online open book quizzes both in week two and week three, 35% (8 of 23) failed to identify that feelings and needs were the two key steps of NVC. Some of the difficulty might have been that some students did not yet have the book and were struggling to shift into study mode in August. But on the final survey, at the end of the semester, nine students still had trouble naming these two key steps with no prompts. And yet in that survey 79% (15 of 19) said that they had used components of NVC on their own outside of class during the semester. Even though they were far from mastering this skill, they clearly found it useful. One commented on the survey, "While I forget the steps of NVC, having a general understanding is good enough for it to influence relationships with other people."

Since this was a class on nonviolence, in the weeks on nonviolent tactics and strategies connections were made to NVC. Students were asked to think about what feelings might be inspired by a particular protest tactic, and what needs were met or unmet related to the issue being protested, and if direct actions were clear about expressing that. The class brainstorm of what makes for an effective tactic came up with many that sounded like universal needs, such as clarity, fun, organization—though they were not initially asked to think of them as needs. Perhaps regularly looking at the needs list inspired this. Though the impetus in including NVC in this class was to foster respectful discussions, in this way it also served to deepen our analysis of nonviolent action. This could have been done even more, and students could have been encouraged to talk about emotions in relation to what makes for good strategy and tactics, such as "If you are frustrated or angry with the counter-protesters blockading, why is that? What need is unmet?" For the simulations day, where small groups were given scenarios and had to plan nonviolent actions, they could have been asked to talk more explicitly about the feelings they were trying to evoke. Even without that instruction, many did discuss that in their groups, though they did not mention them in their presentations at the end of the class.

Students in this class did a paper based on their own primary research with a group engaging in nonviolent action. Students could have been encouraged to use NVC for this. They could have been asked, for example, "If you are bored during a meeting of your group, or other people look like they are, what needs are not met? What other needs might be met?" We did do some discussion of this in class but could have used a scenario on handouts for them to work through in groups. The paper was broken into several steps and from the first proposal stage they

could have been asked to think about the organization's mission and the needs it meets, and the feelings associated with that. They could then be asked to come back to that in their analysis of the groups' tactics and strategies. They could be asked to identify the emotions the group was appealing to in their social media posts.

Training materials on nonviolence rarely ask activists to think about what emotions they are appealing to. Surprisingly, this is not covered in the extensive Empowering Nonviolence site by the War Resisters League used in this class (www.nonviolence.wri-irg.org), nor the class text by Nepstad (2015), the handbook *Beautiful Trouble* (Boyd & Mitchell, 2016), or *How We Win* (Lakey, 2018). Yet fundraising training for activists, such as that by the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training (at grassrootsinstitute.org), regularly emphasizes being clear about what emotions are being fostered, for example in a direct mail fundraising letter. Again, NVC was introduced in this class in an attempt to foster more respectful discussions of difficult topics and thereby foster connection skills that can be transformative and build peace. But one of the surprising findings along the way was that it was also a useful tool for deepening analysis of nonviolent action, thereby also fostering peace by leading to more effective nonviolence and thereby promoting broader social transformation than solely interpersonal skills can, as important as those are (Duckworth et al., 2012). We also found that even when the NVC training offered was not as thorough and well-practiced as we would have liked (as indicated by the various comments above about what could have been improved), it still helped to meet students' needs for respect, which is helpful for then being able to connect across difference. We hope that this will be inspiring to instructors who are new to NVC.

The most striking survey result was the strength of the response, in the final survey, to the question about whether their needs for respect from their peers had been met in the class. One student responded somewhat agree, while the others all strongly agreed (95%, 19 of 20). The next question was whether learning NVC helped meet that need and 80% (16 of 20) either strongly or somewhat agreed; 20% (4 of 20) neither agreed nor disagreed; and none disagreed. When asked "Do you think that bringing feelings and needs into the picture improved the dynamic when talking in class about protests about highly charged topics like gun control?" 60% (12 of 20) said yes or probably yes; 35% (7 of 20) were unsure; and one (5%) said probably not. Comments included:

I think sometimes people get way too into their opinions and they begin to disregard what the other person may be feeling or needing in that moment. With issues like the topic of guns, people have very strong emotions/opinions so tensions can get high. I think it is important to remember the feelings and needs of the other person so that class discussions do not get out of hand

When you bring in feelings and needs you are humanizing the situation.

Understanding each side's feelings and needs helped us recognize we are all concerned about the same thing — safety

We established relationships and were more forgiving because of it

It helped us all to better understand one another

We cover some controversial topics within the class and it's important to set conversation guidelines to make sure the conversation is more civil and NVC helped create a civil space

Yet clearly some students found it more useful than others. One commented, "While I and some others consider feelings and needs important, it was obvious others were uninterested and just stuck to their opinions."

We found through the surveys; our extensive ethnographic notes; discussions of both of these; and analysis of assignments and quizzes, that NVC made a difference in discussions of polarizing political topics. As mentioned in the introduction, the most dramatic of these was the rally on our campus for the right to open carry guns to class. Several students made it clear in class that they agreed with this demand, others that they were deeply opposed (everyone was opposed to the presence of White supremacists in the march). Yet in repeated conversations about this protest both before and after students were able to talk openly about their emotions and listen to each other in ways that met needs for respect. Even when NVC was not formally used, students in this class throughout the semester were more likely to talk about their feelings

than in most classes. Disruptive behavior and incivility in class were unusually low, in striking contrast to the previous iteration of the course.

During the semester, several horrific hate crimes happened across the United States in one week, including the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue near Kent. That day Koopman started with a review of what had happened, talked about some of her own feelings and unmet needs, and then asked students to use NVC to give each other empathy in pairs. She then opened the discussion and was pleased with what it said about the sense of safety and connection in the room that people were willing to share some painful personal stories. We then talked about possible nonviolent action responses to hate crimes, which was a conversation full of insights. Koopman's reflection notes after class were:

> *I struggled today with how to talk about the string of hate crimes last week. It seemed heavy and hard, but I did it anyways and really glad that I did. It met my need for connection with my students, and for contribution. It seemed like it made some very small difference, to be talking about it, asking students to support each other, and to talk about ways to respond nonviolently. Having NVC as a tool to use helped me feel more comfortable talking about this painful and difficult issue in class.*

We would note that the assumption was that students were upset by this attack and space was opened for empathy and then strategizing responses. Space was not opened in the class for students to defend these hate crimes. Likewise, the discussion of the gun rights protest that opened this article did not open space for defending the White supremacists. Conversations on difficult topics can be fostered without making space for hate.

Sometimes Koopman opened and closed class by talking about feelings and needs — sometimes her own, sometimes the feelings and needs at play in a particular protest we were discussing. But she often forgot to use it, despite eventually sprinkling reminders to use NVC throughout her lesson plans. Many of her notes after class were about her frustration that she had failed to use it when she could have. It was hard to remember. Sometimes she would write notes after class like, "NVC is still so hard for me, is it too much to expect, ask for, from my students?" We are no experts, and neither were the students. And yet still it made a real difference in the class. It would have helped to integrate it even more into the classroom in the

various ways described throughout here, but we have found that mastery of the technique is not required before putting it to use. Even this first attempt to integrate it into this class strongly met needs for respect in difficult discussions, and thereby made possible the connection across difference that is essential for the transformative project of peace education. We were also surprised to find how useful NVC was for teaching analysis of nonviolent action to build peace, which was not our original intention in introducing it to the class.

Of course, none of these findings are definitive. This was a limited exploratory, primarily qualitative study of one class over one semester, with no opportunity for later follow-up with this group of students nor comparison to a different group of students taking the same class. It was a relatively small class of 26 students, which made it easier for most students to participate in all class discussions. There is a slight possibility that self-selection bias affected our survey results, as the two students who declined participation may have had negative feelings toward NVC. Nevertheless, our results were heartening enough to share as a contribution to conversations on what works for both teaching peacefully and teaching peace, and we hope that they might inspire others to both try this technique in their own university classroom, whatever the topic of the class, and to engage in more comprehensive studies of that use.

NVC and Peace Education

Gandhi argues that standard university education is violent, and that educational violence cannot be separated from cultural, psychological, political, and other forms of violence, which are all mutually reinforcing (Allen, 2007, pp. 295-296). In reviewing this argument, Allen points out that language, either inside or outside of the classroom, can be used to control, manipulate, or intimidate. Rosenberg (2015) called his technique nonviolent communication because he saw the judgment embedded in most other communication as violent. It distances and others and thus justifies other forms of violence. Learning to talk about emotions in ways that do not judge makes it more possible to have difficult conversations about issues that we disagree on in ways that meet needs for respect and create connection across difference.

Cremin et al. (2018) argue that peace pedagogies for critical democratic skills do not pay enough attention to the role of emotions in learning, and they advocate for more diverse practices. They do not mention NVC, but it fits well with their call for more transrational elicitive approaches to peace education. That article is part of two special issues on teaching peace and war in the classroom (Donahoe & Wibben, 2018), which emphasize the importance of

being attentive to context in doing this work. Emotional responses are socially mediated, and both shaped and read differently depending on the context. The classroom has particular norms for emotion (Roberts & Smith, 2002) and it may be hard for students to accept that openly discussing emotions can contribute to their learning.

Allen (2007) writes that Gandhi repeatedly emphasizes that purely intellectual approaches to education often have no transformative effect on the other, and that involving emotions more often does (p. 298). Peace education then, he argues, should focus on psychological awareness and habitual ways of responding to fear and insecurity — that is, the various forms of socialization that contribute to and justify violence (p. 300). Empathy and care play a central role in Gandhi's approach (p. 303). This appears to be true not just for others but also for oneself, as Allen later argues that "true peace education leads to human beings who become aware of their real ethical and spiritual needs" and that in doing so needs are simplified, one gains greater freedom in one's life, and can be more open to the needs of others (p. 305). This resonates strongly with the steps of NVC, which is a good fit for peace education understood in this way.

Using self-empathy to manage one's emotions during conflict is a fundamental element of NVC as taught by Connor and Killian (2012), the text we used in class. If we can reflect on our own emotions and need for respect alongside the emotions and needs of others, there is a possibility for a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of peace to develop (Baesler & Lauricella, 2014). Building off of this, difficult conversations may be more manageable when individuals are equipped to check-in with their emotions and describe their feelings without using judgment. Having empathy and respect for oneself and others when engaging in difficult dialogue is an essential part of peace education for both students and teachers. This is true whether or not the course is formally a peace studies course, and indeed using NVC as a tool for difficult conversations in any college classroom is a way of mainstreaming peace education across the curriculum. It is particularly useful for teaching nonviolent action, not only because it can deepen our analysis of nonviolence, as described above, but also because it is serves as a tool of emotional regulation. There are growing calls for nonviolence training to include such modern forms of the spiritual purification that Gandhi advocated before satyagraha, so that, as Haga (2020) puts it, we can head into the streets with more spaciousness in our hearts.

Conclusion

Higher education is rife with the emotional distancing and judgment that makes other forms of violence possible. NVC offers tools for making all college classes less violent in that sense, but also for making any college classroom a space for teaching peace skills and building peace itself. Being able to talk more deeply about emotions, without judgment, and recognizing our own and others' universal needs offers us a way to connect across difference, an essential step for peace in any context. If higher education is meant to serve society at large, this is a powerful way to do so.

Our intention was to see if teaching students NVC and encouraging its use would help to meet the need for respect in difficult conversations in the college classroom. We found that in our context it did. But we want to highlight the useful finding that it did not take a great deal of time, or mastery of the tool by either students or instructor, for it to have this impact. Certainly, a deeper use of the tool could move students closer towards the transformation Gandhi points to, but we urge other instructors not to wait until they master the tool but rather to experiment with incorporating NVC even lightly as they learn it.

NVC can be useful for difficult conversations in any college classroom, but we found it particularly useful for deepening students' understanding of nonviolent action. This was true because it helped to create the safety to discuss controversial nonviolent actions, but also because appealing to emotions and pointing to unmet needs are key aspects of nonviolent direct action. Having that vocabulary from NVC made it easier to include that analysis in our discussions. In this way NVC not only strengthened interpersonal skills key for fostering peace, but also strengthened students' ability to engage in more effective nonviolent action in the future and thereby create the structural change so needed for a more just peace in our world today (Duckworth, 2012). Though we did not present it as such in class, in light of increasing arguments for the importance of emotional awareness and regulation skills when engaging in direct action (Haga, 2020), it seems that NVC could also improve students' active nonviolence skills in that way. Using NVC in the college classroom offers a rich vein both for deepening our understanding of and skills for creative nonviolent ways to build more just peace(s), and for building peace through more empathic connection across difference.

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