BUILDING PEACE, ABOLISHING WAR:

A Conversation with Phill Gittins on Peace Education, Praxis, and Global Leadership

Written by Lisa Hilt & Phill Gittins



Phill presenting at a NewGen Peacebuilders workshop.

In May, Lisa spoke with Phill Gittins, PhD, about his story, his current peace education work, and the opportunities and needs he sees for the future. Phill is currently the Education Director at World BEYOND War and sits on several boards, committees, and steering groups, including the Journal of Peace Education, Global Campaign for Peace Education, and Global Campaign on Military Spending UK. He has over 20 years of leadership, programming, and analysis experience in peace, education, psychology, youth, and community development. He has lived, worked, and travelled in over 60 countries across six continents; taught in schools, colleges, and universities worldwide; and trained thousands on peace and social change-related issues.

What brought you to peace education work and World BEYOND War? And what inspires you to do this work?

There's a long story and a short one - I'll start with the short version. I didn't enjoy school when I was a teenager, so I left early with no idea of what I wanted to do. While working at a factory, one of my colleagues suggested that I might be suited to being a youth worker. I was sceptical - I was only 16 at the time – but he introduced me to someone he knew who worked with young people, and I eventually trained as a youth worker. That marked the beginning of the path that partly led me to where I am now.

Fast-forward to years later. I went on to pursue multiple degrees. I have always studied and worked because I deeply value praxis (where critical reflection and action inform and strengthen one another). Over the years, alongside my degree and work in the area of youth and community practice, I also trained and worked as a psychotherapist and teacher before starting to pursue a Master's degree in Education.

Before I completed my Master's, I took a year off to travel around the world, and it was eye-opening in that it revealed how privileged I was to be born where I was and to have access to all these opportunities. I also witnessed the devastation caused by violence and conflict, and it started me thinking: how can I utilize some of my skills and passion to work for peace? At that time, I had never encountered the concepts of peace education or peace and conflict studies, so I did what most people do: I Googled.

After discovering this new world, I shifted my focus to peace education. In my Master's research, I studied how young people in England and Bolivia learn about peace and conflict. I spent 10 months in Bolivia, volunteering in a youth offending prison and teaching at various universities. In 2012, I participated in the Rotary Peace Fellowship and pursued my PhD in International Conflict Analysis. As part of that, I developed a methodology and framework for peace education, which served as a foundation for two global peace education programs I helped to co-create, NewGen Peacebuilders (NGP) and Peace Education and Action for Impact. I thought it would be good to use the focus of my PhD to inform something practical and potentially global that I helped to create. I used the NGP program as a case study to show the process of working with communities. After finishing my PhD and before joining World BEYOND War in 2019, I continued working with NGP, initiating and leading the piloting of the model outside the U.S. and with university-aged students in Latin America, as well as supporting several initiatives within the U.S.

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Returning to your question about inspiration—what brought me to this work—it revolves around asking: How can we think differently about education and youth work, and how can we influence what little we can? I have always been drawn to the informal side of education. Even before I fully understood why, it made me aware of the limitations of formal education: in how it's structured, what it prioritizes, and how it approaches learning and development. I have always tried to blur the lines between study and practice, learning and action. In peace work, particularly, there is often a divide between thinkers and doers, between theorists and practitioners, but they should inform one another. That is something I aim to bridge in my work, improving both along the way. While I deeply value inner peace and peace with others—as a therapist, I understand that is important—I believe real change also entails understanding and challenging the larger systems at play.

In the end, while there have been multiple inspirations and motivations, I would not be here today if it weren't for the youth worker I met when I was 16. I am very sure of that.

Tell us about your current work with World BEYOND War.

Two things differentiate World BEYOND War.

First, we are global in scope. We are a small team but work with an extensive network: individuals and organizations in 202 countries have signed our peace pledge; we work with chapters and affiliates worldwide and have 3000+ alumni who have taken our courses. We understand that if we want to replace the war system with the peace system, it needs to be global in scope while ensuring the work is contextualized.

The second, and this is probably the most important thing that differentiates us from other organizations, is that we are not just focused on ending specific wars but the institution of war, the system that prepares, plans, and profits from the ongoing wars around the world. Within that war system also lies the military-industrial-media-academic complex (MIMAC).

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What does World BEYOND War envision or hope to see regarding a peace system?

There are many ideas out there about what a peace system should be. Our approach centers on three interconnected strategies, accompanied by key components.

The first is demilitarizing security: shifting from militarized and national security to broader notions of human, common, and ecological security. The second is managing conflict without violence, rooted in practices of nonviolence and nonviolent action, among other things. The third, creating a culture of peace, is more subtle but just as vital—focusing on the psychological and cultural foundations needed to move away from a culture of war.

Peace systems already exist in many parts of the world, but we need to learn more from them and to scale them, so they are as global and comprehensive as the war system is now.

Can you tell us a little about World BEYOND War's peace education work?

As an organization, we have three main strategies: education, activism, and media and communications. We focus on educating about, for, and towards peace and away from war and militarism. We do that in many ways, including online courses, webinars, podcasts, workshops, factsheets, and books.

Our online courses have participants from all around the world. So far, over 3,000 people have completed our courses. The youngest person we have had in a course was 13, and the oldest (I know of) was 94. She talked about World War II in the class. She was so articulate. I think 'significant' education should be like a learning laboratory, where diverse people are brought together to learn with and from each other. We invite guest speakers with experience in the topic to lead and facilitate the course modules. We try our best to provide good content, and that is important, but the real magic happens between the participants and facilitators.



Phill presenting at Alliance for Peacebuilding event (2019).

Our courses cover various topics, including War Abolition 101 and 201; War and the Environment; Media and Communications for Peace, Unarmed Civilian Defense (UCD); and War, Peace, and Law. They address the war and peace systems and respond to current and relevant issues. For example, in the War and Environment course, we try to help participants understand the need to address the war system, since the military is one of the biggest polluters and users of fossil fuels on the planet. In the UCD course, we explore nonviolent alternatives to war and answer the question: What can citizens do to protect themselves when militaries attack?

We also have a joint program with Rotary called Peace Education and Action For Impact (PEAI), a peacebuilding and leadership program focused on youth. The program is youth-led and intergenerational, and centers around cross-cultural learning, dialogue, and action.

Since the pilot in 2021, PEAI has impacted youth, communities, and organizations in 19 countries across five continents. Each country has a national project team of 10 young people aged 18 to 35 and four adults. They participate in 6 weeks of online learning, followed by 8 weeks of action, during which the group completes a project in their community.

Each country project is context-specific but designed around the three strategies of World BEYOND War's peace system: demilitarizing security, managing conflict without violence, and creating a culture of peace. In Nigeria, the team researched school kidnappings and shared their findings in a policy brief. A joint Ukraine-Russia team of young people offered online peace education and cultural exchange to schools in both countries. In Cameroon, the team launched a campaign to boost youth leadership in peacebuilding, earning recognition from the Minister. There are many more, but these examples give a sense of the global work being done.

Looking to the future, what opportunities do you see for peace education and peace leadership in this area?

In 2024, I was commissioned by the Council of Europe to conduct a feasibility study focused on peace education in non-formal learning and youth work. The conclusions and recommendations were approached, and we are moving forward with the next steps. This includes working, as lead author, with a drafting group to prepare a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on peace education, for adoption by the statutory bodies in 2025, followed by the development of resources in 2026 to support implementation at the national level. This work can influence peace education policy and practice across the Council's 46 member states. The feasibility study allowed me to investigate some of the great work out there and to look at what is missing, much of which is likely relevant beyond Europe. A missing element in many peace and security efforts is a focus on the war system. Much more could be done to educate people on how this system not only undermines the prospects for peace and security but also hinders progress and sustainable development.

Peace education should be adapted to specific contexts, and while there are multiple different traditions, several guiding principles define it. One of the things that sets peace education apart —its *raison d'être*—is its focus on personal and social transformation and its commitment to moving the world away from a culture of war and militarism towards a culture of peace and nonviolence.

When it comes to leadership, governments need a truly comprehensive approach that not only talks about a culture of peace but also confronts the culture of war. Nearly every government speaks of peace, yet few treat it as a legal right or invest in the things that make societies safer, more peaceful, and more sustainable. Global frameworks like the SDGs or the Institute for Economics and Peace talk about war's devastation but ignore the system that sustains it. Authentic leadership is not increasing military spending or saying, "we need to prepare for war to avoid war". It is the opposite: learning from countries like Costa Rica, which say no to violence and yes to peace by peaceful means. That is the kind of leadership we need, now more than ever.

I'm curious to hear more of your thoughts about the need for better alignment between research and practice.

Too often there is a gap between those who engage in the academic study of a topic and those who engage in its practice. Much of my career has been spent trying to bridge that gap. My PhD intentionally combined both inquiry and action. I wrote an article in 2019 called "Doing Participatory Action Research as a Doctoral Student in the Peace and Conflict Studies Field". I argue that we should have more participatory action research within the peacebuilding field. This approach helps us to improve our research—as it is grounded in practice—and it helps inform our practice, ensuring it is grounded in research.

This is not just about peace work. It also has implications for how we think about the training and professional development of people entering the peace field. It is striking how someone can move from undergraduate study to a Master's, to a PhD without ever having real on-the-ground experience, yet still be regarded as an expert. Much more could be done to ensure the 'experts' in academic knowledge understand the importance of real-world impact. My eight months of participatory research in Bolivia taught me far more than any short visit could. By listening and engaging deeply, I built trust. I learned things I could never have learned from the typical "travelling scholar" visits to conduct interviews and leave, like when a Minister asked me to share findings in a way that would be useful locally. That led to a youth-led event with the Ministry of Education. That event did not count toward my PhD; from a scholarly point of view, it is not recognized as "good work" but I think that is an overly narrow view. Yes, we need scholarly articles, but we also need flexibility and responsiveness to local needs. In the best cases, work should be both informative and actionable.

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Is there anything else you want to share with readers?

There is a need for blue-sky thinking and traditional scholarship. Still, I think part of peace work is about finding balance. We talk about this in World BEYOND War's forthcoming book, *From a War System to a Peace System: A Guide to a World BEYOND War* (which builds on previous editions of the book called *A Global Security System: An Alternative to War*). We talk about "transformative oscillation": balance between inner and outer, global and local, study and practice, North and South, present and future. It is never either/or. It is both/and.

In addition, to improve the prospects for achieving lasting peace, many in peacebuilding may need to extend their identity to include being against war. Ironically, while nearly all are for peace, many are not aligned with being against war. While it is essential to promote peace with self and others, we must also name and address the elephant in the room: the war system. To have lasting and just peace, we have to take a stance that—as World BEYOND War frames it—is both pro-peace and anti-war.

Please visit the World BEYOND War website to learn more about Phill's work.