Connecting Communities and Curriculum in the M.Phil. in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

Community Learning and Reflective Practice in Northern Ireland

About the Module

Each year, approximately ten students opt to engage in service-learning with community peace and reconciliation organisations to build practical skills and enhance their understanding of reconciliation work in a post-conflict society. Students undertake a minimum of ninety-six hours placement with their organisations between October and April. These placements are brokered by the lecturer.

Students spend at least 24 hours in personal study/reading to prepare for classroom sessions. They are encouraged to think of their experiences as ‘texts’ that can be read and shared with others. There is an ongoing process of reflection about how these ‘texts’ relate to academic analyses of Northern Ireland. (The students also take a ‘Reconciliation in Northern Ireland’ module where they study the experiences of practitioners working in Northern Ireland and other troubled areas of the world.)

The service-learning module includes a reflective silent retreat at Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery in Rostrevor, County Down. Students make presentations about their service-learning experiences and are assessed by their lecturer through a reflective practice portfolio. Partner organisations provide a short written evaluation of the students’ work for the portfolio.

Benefits

“There are types of knowledge that cannot be gained in the classroom or from a book, especially in the field of conflict resolution. Service learning gives our students an opportunity to access this ‘hands on’ knowledge and integrate it with their classroom learning.”

Dr. Gladys Ganiel, Module Coordinator

“We truly engaged the cycle of peace praxis, as our theory informed our practice and our practice informed our theory.”

Michael McRay, M.Phil. Student

Challenges

“The most challenging aspect of my placement was to find links that were personally and professionally meaningful between the transformative community building approach the Dock Church adopted with the wider theoretical underpinnings that I was exposed to within the classroom.”

Sweatha Shankar, M. Phil. Student

“Service-learning modules can take significantly more administration time than other modules, especially as you develop relationships with people from various organisations in your field.”

Dr. Gladys Ganiel, Module Coordinator

“It is difficult with such a cosmopolitan student body for someone unfamiliar with the weird and very specific nuances of Northern Ireland quickly to insert themselves into a local NGO.”

Robin Wilson, Community Partner

Tips for Colleagues

- Maintain regular contact with community partners throughout the year.
- Don’t take it for granted that students will connect theory and practice – discuss this in class sessions.
- Closely monitor students’ activities to make sure they are not working with their organisation too much or too little at any point in the module.

For further information
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