Peace Literacy: Healing Aggression, Listening with Empathy, and Practicing Calm
Sharyn Clough, PhD, Director of Phronesis Lab, OSU
Peace Literacy Curriculum Co-coordinator, sharyn.clough@oregonstate.edu

90 min. lesson, including a 5 min break and three film clips, designed for high school and college-age students, excerpted from Peace Literacy Lesson Plan 1 available at peaceliteracy.org

Learning Outcomes:
- Understand the difference between aggression as posturing and aggression as violence.
- Recognize posturing in human and non-human animals.
- See aggression as a distress response.
- Listen with empathy.
- Calm others down during conflict.
- Calm ourselves down during conflict.

5 mins
Circulate and check in with each student
- maybe have music playing – Marvin Gaye “What’s Going On” never gets old 😊

10 mins
Introduce Peace Literacy
- Most of us think about peace as an abstract goal that would be nice to have, but it’s unclear how to get there.
- What if we thought instead about peace as a set of skills that take training and practice and discipline?
- Many leaders in the peace and justice movements over the years, especially Gandhi and Rev. Dr. MLK Jr., have recognized the importance of training, practice, and discipline.
- (mention the Nashville and Birmingham Lunch Counters Campaign)
- Gandhi and MLK Jr. in turn inspired many others including Paul K. Chappell, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Iraq war
- Chappell talks about our need for what he calls peace literacy
- (you can watch 1min 22secs of Paul in this clip – it’s near the bottom of the main webpage http://www.peaceliteracy.org/, but also here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnYcpjzaKHk&feature=youtu.beclip from).

Note about the clip:
- Chappell asks us to imagine a basketball game where none of the players know how to play basketball
- It would be a mess - we don’t expect people to just know how to play basketball.
- If we saw the players floundering on the court, we wouldn’t weep for humanity.
- We’d teach them basketball!
- When we look around us at the pain and suffering we see, we shouldn’t feel hopeless.
- It takes training and lots and lots of practice to play basketball well.
- Similarly with peace – you need to learn peace skills and you need to practice.
We’re going to introduce some peace skills that you can practice and use right here in class, at home with your families, and with your friends.

We’ll look at three Peace Literacy skills:
1. Seeing Aggression as a Distress Response
2. Listening with Empathy
3. Calming Ourselves and Others During Conflict

The goal is to give you some tools that will help you think of aggression in a new way, and to give you some skills you can practice to keep calm in a conflict.

**5 mins**

**Empathy Exercise 1 (empathy for yourself – this requires that you listen to yourself – it’s a kind of mindfulness)**

- You won’t share this with anyone, but take out a piece of paper and write down 1 or 2 things that are nagging at you in the background, lingering worries or concerns that have nothing directly to do with this class but might affect your experience here today.
- Read them over – don’t make a judgement about whether they’re good or bad, just listen to them, just notice what’s there.
- This exercise won’t get rid of those intrusive thoughts, but by noticing them they are likely to have less of an effect.
- Tuck the paper away.

**5 mins**

Take out a sheet of paper and write a paragraph answering these questions:
- What kinds of things lead you to behave aggressively? And what does your aggression look like? How do you behave when you’re feeling aggressive?

**15 mins**

- If you’re ok sharing what you wrote, tell us, what kinds of things lead you to behave aggressively?
- On the far right side of the board, write a list from their answers (use red or orange markers if you have them available, to symbolize “the fires of aggression”)

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*Clough, 2019 | Peace Literacy | Aggression*
In the middle of the board, start writing down their answers to the questions “What does your aggression look like? How do you behave when you’re feeling aggressive?”

As you write their answers, divide them up into the three categories of the Anatomy of Aggression (add the headings in only after you have a few examples from each)

End with warning aggression/posturing (you are unlikely to get any examples of these)

Think of a scene from basically any Animal Planet video where 3 wolves and a grizzly bear are circling the carcass of a dead deer, what usually happens next?

They typically do not fight, they posture

Posturing in animals is a kind of aggression that actually comes from fear

What are they afraid of? Getting injured or hurt! Why? There are no hospitals in the wild!

Use this diagram as a guide:

We almost never learn about warning aggression, we only learn about the fight or flight response
- A lot of aggression in nonhuman animals is posturing or warning aggression which is meant to DETER violence, so aggression and violence are not the same thing.
- Do humans posture? Yes they do!
- Show Southpark clip (30 seconds, mild profanity): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHnbClN_G6w

**Key step: seeing warning aggression as fear requires empathy**

- What’s empathy?
- When someone is posturing and coming at you aggressively posturing, it is hard to empathetically recognize their fear or other kind of distress.
- That’s why you have to practice the skills of recognizing your own and other’s aggression as a distress response.

**Go over the concept of “Aggression as a Distress Response”**

- Aggression is like the heat emitted from a fire
  - When you’re on fire, you’re in distress!
  - What kinds of distress or fires cause aggression?
  - Fear is a very common cause of aggression
  - Go back to the list on the board of the things they said caused their aggression.
  - Can something that happened to you when you were five make you feel aggressive today? Yes!

5 mins

Break (to stay on a theme, play some music - try Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Me”)

10 mins

**Show Key and Peele video** (first 18 seconds contain profanity – you can mute it until 19 seconds in) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUsFeyGxaaU

- What kinds of fires were the fuel for Jordan Peele’s character’s aggression?
- Add his fires to the students’ list on the board (as below, to the right of the students’ list)

- Recognizing aggression as a distress response requires empathy

...
It’s a skill that expands your options when you’re responding to your own aggression or someone else’s. Sometimes you might have to respond aggressively – with warning or passive or even hostile aggression, but you might not have to – now you have another option. **But this option is a skill and skills require practice.**

You can download the Fires of Aggression poster (as below, left) at [http://www.peaceliteracy.org/compendium](http://www.peaceliteracy.org/compendium)

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**Draw Venn Diagram, as below right:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Fires of Aggression:</th>
<th>Healthier Ways to Deal with Pain/Discomfort:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you see aggression at the surface look for the fires burning beneath.</td>
<td>All aggression is caused by pain/discomfort, but not all pain/discomfort has to lead to aggression. We can use Peace Literacy to help students have more options</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Disrespect</th>
<th>Frustration</th>
<th>Insecurity</th>
<th>Humiliation</th>
<th>Betrayal</th>
<th>Shame</th>
<th>Physical Discomfort</th>
<th>Psychological Trauma</th>
<th>Loneliness</th>
<th>Alienation</th>
<th>Low Self-Worth</th>
<th>Disappointment</th>
<th>Despair</th>
<th>Rejection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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**10 mins**

- Let’s look at a few other important skills that give you options:
  - **Calming Ourselves and Others During Conflict**
  - Think about Michael Key’s character
  - What did he do well?
  - He stayed calm!
  - Staying calm is the first step to keeping other people calm
  - telling people “Calm down” almost never works!
  - **To calm other people down** we need to focus on three things (write these on the board)
    1. Be calm ourselves.
    2. Listen with empathy and be respectful.
    3. Show care and concern.
  - **To stay calm ourselves:**
    - Maintain empathy when we are in conflict with someone (Seeing the fire beneath their aggression)
    - Give people the benefit of the doubt when we are in conflict with them, which means seeking clarification rather than acting from a position of ignorance.
• **Do not personalize the conflict**, which means using empathy to escape the confines of our own ego, and training our mind to see the other factors playing into the conflict. (We might be part or all of the cause of the conflict, but we keep the conflict at the center, rather than us).

• **Keep things in perspective**, which means training our mind to think about reasons why we appreciate people when we come into conflict with them.
  - None of these skills are guarantee to resolve the conflict immediately, but they significantly improve your chances of success and they also help minimize the chances that a conflict will result in bad blood between you and the other person.
  - How many of the adults in your life practice these skills? Probably not many. But the reason they don’t practice these skills is not because they don’t think they’re important but because they were not trained with these skills – they are floundering without much skill.

5 mins

**Empathy Exercise 2 (empathy for others)**
  - You won’t share this with anyone, but take out a piece of paper and thinking about someone else in the room, write down 1 or 2 things that you know they are struggling with.
  - Tuck the paper away.

15 mins

**Exercise for Listening with Empathy**
Divide the room along its longest axis and hang two signs one at either end: Agree, Disagree
  - Have students stand and tuck away their bags.
  - Begin with a deep slow breath, in and out through the nose.
  - **Pick a prompt ahead of time** that is relevant to the students and for which you can think of good arguments in certain contexts for agreeing *and* disagreeing.
  - Read out the prompt.
  - Tell students not to answer their views out loud, just to think about whether they agree or disagree and then move to the side of the room that fits with their view.
  - Then have them form a continuum stretching from the Agree to Disagree positions.
  - Have them join hands, and double back until everyone is facing someone from the other end of the continuum (there will be some in the middle who are noncommittal).
  - Give instructions about practicing empathetic and respectful listening.
  - Ask students how they will communicate empathy and respect without speaking – usually nodding and making eye contact.
  - This sounds easy and straightforward but in fact we all need practice at it.
    - Choose which side of the room will speak first about their view
    - Tell them to breathe deeply. Feel their feet contact the ground. Look at their partner.
    - The first partner speaks for ONE MINUTE, the other partner DOES NOT SPEAK, BUT LISTENS CAREFULLY.
- Then for ONE MINUTE the listening partner repeats what they heard, without saying whether they agree or disagree, using terms the speaking partner would recognize as their own
- Now switch.

5 mins
Debrief
- This was a simple exercise to start
- To get better at it we’d need to make it harder each time - how might we make it harder? (pick more personal topics, listen for longer than 1 min., list 2 points of agreement)

Follow-up exercise:
- **The Aggression Journal:** Have students keep a journal where they note the times they have felt aggression in themselves; and ask them to see if after this lesson they can reach deeper to identify the underlying fires (pain, discomfort) that are causing their aggression (fear? embarrassment?).
- They can use this rubric to guide their observations:

### Rubric for Skill #1 - Learning how to see aggression as a distress response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Level I Competency</th>
<th>Level II Competency</th>
<th>Level III Competency</th>
<th>Level IV Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual is developing self-awareness of distress when acting aggressively or thinking aggressive thoughts.</td>
<td>Can recognize feelings of distress underlying aggressive thoughts and actions <strong>after</strong> conflict/incident has occurred.</td>
<td>Can recognize feelings of distress <strong>during</strong> the conflict/incident and is able to <strong>attempt</strong> to stop or minimize the behavior during the conflict/incident.</td>
<td>Can recognize feelings of distress <strong>before</strong> aggression or aggressive thoughts. Can redirect these thoughts or actions and keep them from occurring.</td>
<td>Can recognize that this skill is context dependent – that is we can be skilled at this in some contexts but not others. Can exercise self-compassion when skill levels fluctuate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher self-check: Are you modeling this for your students and colleagues? 😊</td>
<td>Depth/consistency: You might have deep competency at this level but not at other levels, and not all the time.</td>
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