

A Generalist in Specialistland

Paul Wehr

Generalist n. a person competent in several different fields and activities (Oxford Encyclopedic)

My experiment as an academic generalist began as a break from graduate study, doing refugee relief work during the Algerian War. I took a first step hunkered down in one of our service centers on the Algerian-Moroccan border as the FLN made its nightly raids against the mined and electrified barrier defending France's last colony. Bullets and explosions were close enough to present conflict in a most immediate way as a problem to be worked on, should I survive.

I was then at a major decision point. Another year of refugee work, then what? I found graduate work intellectually stimulating but its disciplinary boundaries bothered me. I wanted not only to understand conflict but to replace its harmful consequences with beneficial ones...to study the problem and transform it in equal measure. It seemed to me then (and still does), that a solid understanding of a problem is best reached through a transdisciplinary perspective, with observation and direct experience continually informing one another. I had already tasted that mix of participant observation and analysis with my study of the civil rights movement in North Carolina (1960) and liked it. Could such a balance of understanding and intervention be sustained during the specialized training and vetting of the academic world? Was my vision of teacher-scholar-practitioner enabled by the security of the university but not captured by its insularity at all realistic?

In my early 20s at the time, I lacked the life experience to deter me from such foolhardiness. So, I returned to campus to find, if I could, my unconventional, transdisciplinary way as an academic generalist. Good fortune, improvisation and planning have brought me through it, in relatively good health and humor. In retrospect, where has that journey taken me?

I was bringing a strange mix of attributes to the enterprise: training in sociology, international relations, history; cross-cultural experience; three foreign languages; a change ethic tested in two social movements; a quirky personality mix of congeniality and introversion. While I already knew some activist-scholars, none were working equally in both the academic and real worlds as I intended to do. I was entering uncharted territory and would have to fashion my own combination of teaching, research, publishing, and building on behalf of beneficial conflict.

Teacher-Researcher-Writer. The question was how to teach, study and publish in a way that permitted half-time movement-building? It seems now that I used a **value-added approach**... a series of projects built around my involvement in a sequence of social movements. I would select a theoretical concept that illuminated what I observed in the movement, then add insight I thought I could share in movement-building, the classroom and print. Each project would produce one or two concepts or methods enriching

another's contribution. For example, I developed **stepwise escalation** and **self-limiting conflict** (1979) from an approach I perceived Gandhi had developed in his satyagraha movement, a perception stimulated by James Coleman's (1957) theory of runaway conflict. Participating in the Central America Solidarity movement and studying the Esquipulas peace process, I conceived from Boulding's (1989) three faces of power idea my **strategic power mix** (1994) to explain the Sandanista government's policy in the Contra War. The value I added in each instance gave the original idea cross-level utility as a teaching tool in my conflict courses, where students could apply them to personal conflict choices. This process was refined with at least five social movements I studied, taught about and participated in: civil rights, Gandhian, peace, environment, Sanctuary/Solidarity.

I was guided in this academic experimentation by two pedagogical principles: one learns by doing /reflecting, and one should live what one teaches. Projects in my courses were designed to lead students to a behavior change responding to the problems we were studying. In my environments course, for example, the **personal sustainability matrix** students used over the semester permitted them to monitor and measure their progress in, say, energy conservation or solid waste reduction. I also used my home to demonstrate methods of renewable and efficient energy use, sharing my successes and failures with field trips to the house. My social movements courses have always centered in my sharing knowledge from movements in which I have had direct experience.

How have I done as teacher? In the 70 or so classes I have taught, students have rated me a good teacher, with around a 3.0 FCQ average (Ap A) despite my strict grading policy (the mean student grade in my courses has been around 2.4 or C+). My peers gave me higher marks, with 61% of 122 college faculty I taught rating my teaching excellent and 36% good (Ap B). I appreciate most, however, the contributions of my students in the world (Ap C). I have learned from them as they have from me.

As a researcher, I have published around 50 scholarly works, including seven books (Ap D). My value-added approach to scholarship has led to a number of concepts and methods in addition to those mentioned above: **values mapping** (1978), **conflict mapping** (1979), **commensurate security** (1988), **outsider-neutral/insider-partial mediation** (1991), an **activist commitment model** (1998) and the **theoretical utility module and conflict knowledge pool** (2002). My final book, Using Conflict Theory, is an integrating work to further the theory-practice link facilitating beneficial conflict.

But have I produced with intended effect? I can never know. Such an approach as mine, wandering across several movements, from one theorist to another, from one concept to the next does not lead to theoretical coherence or to one's integration in a community of scholars. I have been somewhat of a loner though I have worked with several fine co-authors. Despite the scattered nature of my published work, at least 100 authors have cited it (Ap E), to suggest that even a generalist on the periphery of academic enterprise can contribute to idea creation.

Movement-Building. My part in building the beneficial conflict movement followed two parallel tracks, an intellectual one with university curriculum and an interventionist one in various social change movements. My activity in the former owes much to historical accident. As I was finishing graduate school, peace and conflict scholarship was growing in response to the Cold War and the hot one in Vietnam. With that fortuitous timing, I was able to grow with the beneficial conflict movement, building my part of it in both academic and real worlds simultaneously. Students learning to understand conflict and do it beneficially needed social labs and higher education, in its confusion of that time, was open to innovation. I was a founding member and first director of COPRED, the North American peace research and education consortium, teaching during that time a Short Course in conflict management for the American Association for the Advancement of Science taken by hundreds of university faculty interested in teaching the subject (Ap B).

By 1982, peace and conflict studies was well underway at Colorado, but graduate students interested in conflict sociology had few seminars and scant opportunity for real world application. In that year, I and colleagues created a graduate concentration in social conflict. During its history, the concentration produced 21 PhDs and as many MAs (Ap F), all now making marks as teachers and practitioners of beneficial conflict. But no curriculum flourishes without a supportive unit behind it and the Sociology Department was in serious trouble by 1985. I agreed to chair the department at that point, inviting the specialty clusters of faculty (criminology, conflict, feminist sociology, demography) to reorganize the curriculum around their interests, which we then did. While my chairing was not an unqualified success, it initiated a forward movement for the department that continues to this day. As the 1987 Program Review Panel put it, "current chair doing a very effective job... unusual sensitivity to departmental problems... motivating the faculty to improve the department." (AP G) Lately in my career, I have been heading the Peace and Conflict Studies program <www.colorado.edu/peacestudies> with a special concern for expanding career guidance for its graduates and providing it a resource base with an endowment (Ap H).

Through the years, I took the occasional opportunity to strengthen dispute resolution around the University. In the 1980s, I led efforts to establish an ombuds office here and hired its first ombuds(wo)man. In the 90s, I helped resolve a conflict in the Physics Department serious enough to endanger its recruitment program. Two years of mediation produced an agreement formalized with a signing ceremony and a champagne toast. The agreement has held for six years now (Ap I). Nor have that department's recent Nobel prizes hurt its recruiting!

My research and program grants over 30 years totalled around \$1,400,000 (Ap D) with help from the Conflict Research Consortium that I and two former students established in the late 80s (Ap J). That organization has become the world's primary online source of conflict information <www.crinfo.org>.

In my social activism, one thing seemed to lead to another. My association with the Quakers led in the mid-1970s to my helping organize a movement to end the Rocky Flats plant's nuclear weapons production and radiation leaks. That work led in turn to membership on Boulder County's Nuclear War Education Committee and the Governor's Monitoring Committee on Rocky Flats (Ap K). Which further located me for founding with others in 1983 the Rocky Mountain Peace (and Justice) Center with which I have since been much involved. Over 30 years of movement-building, I have learned much about peacemaking as a member of Boulder Friends Meeting.

I am gratified that most of the movement organizations I helped create and nurture are alive and well: COPRED, Peace/War/Conflict Section of the ASA, Rocky Mountain Peace/Justice Center, the journal Peace and Change, Conflict Research Consortium, Peace and Conflict Studies, CU Ombuds Office. As for social movement results, Rocky Flats is out of the bomb business, the Contras are history, and Big Oil has yet to enter ANWR. Our movements didn't do it all but we helped.

Costs and Benefits. The path of this academic generalist was not easy. The margin is an uncomfortable place. One is rarely fully accepted by the academic or practitioner communities or their reward systems, being always a bit suspect, absent an exclusive commitment. But the loneliness at that margin has been offset by relationships with some great colleagues and students. I have gained mightily from balancing the academic and activist roles. It has immunized me to the usual cynicism afflicting the student of social problems who does little to solve them. Combining understanding and intervention in equal measure has brought me an integrated life and a modicum of peace of mind. And there is great satisfaction in working at what you (rather than "the boss") choose(s), and I have certainly done that.

I would hope my survival experience encourages graduate students fearing for their activist inclinations within the increasingly specialized, bureaucratized, even corporatized university. Those trends work against the transdisciplinary comprehension, critical sense and ethical clarity for which academe has historically been celebrated. An academic career equally committed to understanding and changing becomes more difficult each year. Still, such a dual commitment can be a most rewarding one, presenting us with both challenge and opportunity when progressive movements need us and we them more than ever.

Appendices. Memoirs are notoriously self-serving. The wary reader will find admittedly selective documentation in a binder (Generalist) in the department office.