



Syllabus

[Build Content](#)[Assessments](#)[Tools](#)[Publisher Content](#)

Syllabus

Topics in Conflict Resolution: Intractable Conflict

CRES 4820

Fall 2013

Syllabus Updated: 9-1-2013



Instructor: Heidi Burgess

Time: 2:00 – 4:50 Thursdays, Sept 13 – Oct 11 (5 weeks)

Location: BMC 218

"Office" Location: Arthur Gilbert Cafe (or behind the cafe area if there is an event in the –see below for caveats)

"Office" hours: 12–2 Thursdays, EXCEPT Sept. 26, when I will do 10:30–11:30 and 5–6. (During regular office hour times, I will be giving a talk on Religion and Peacebuilding to v everyone is invited! Location TBD!).

Other contact information: I am often available by phone at my Boulder office: 303–497–1635 when I am not at DU, and my email address is heidi.burgess@colorado.edu (I don't think I have a du email address anymore.)

I move around a lot, so email is usually the best way to reach me.

Course Description:

This course is about the biggest problems facing our communities, our nation, and our world today. Ones that quickly come to my mind—and probably yours—are the economy (jobs deficits, budgets, debt ceilings, housing, poverty, etc.), security (freedom from the fear of war and/or terrorism, as well as unmet fundamental needs), social services (health care, education, the justice system, etc.), and the environment (particularly climate change, energy and resources, and air and water quality, etc.).

Our communities, our nation, and the world have proven remarkably unable to “solve” any of these problems. Why? I assert it is because they are all underlain by a more fundamental problem—the inability to constructively deal with difficult and intractable conflicts. These conflicts prevent us, as individuals, our governments (at all levels), and our commercial and civil society organizations, from making wise decisions or taking effective action that will address any of these pressing problems. We are stuck, in almost every case, in what Wil Zartman calls a “hurting stalemate” where combatants battle each other instead of the problem, and we all go down the drain together.

While “traditional conflict resolution” which, somewhat ironically, was named 30 years ago “ADR” for “alternative dispute resolution,” is well able to settle or resolve a vast majority of “tractable” conflicts and disputes, there are a significant number of really difficult problems that seem largely unresponsive to standard ADR techniques. In a provocative new book, Columbia professor Peter Coleman asserts that these are the “5% conflicts” – the 5% that (and I) call “intractable.”

Many mediators purposely shy away from these conflicts. Several years ago, the predecessor to the Association for Conflict Resolution then called SPIDR (Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution) put out a “definitive” (for the time) handbook on mediating environmental conflicts. A large part of the handbook was spent explaining which conflicts could be mediated and which not. SPIDR members were advised to avoid the ones that were unlikely to respond positively to mediation because it would be a waste of everyone’s time and a threat to the mediators’ (and the field’s) reputations. If it can’t be mediated, the implication was, stay away from it!! Unfortunately, in much conflict resolution scholarship and practice, this attitude has changed remarkably little.

That advice long intrigued me, and like an adolescent who refuses to listen to her parent was drawn toward such conflicts. If they can’t be mediated, doesn’t that suggest we ought to be doing something else? What? Is there really no solution but to suffer through? Will we ever be able to get to the other side of these conflicts? At what cost?

Along with Peter Coleman, I have been studying intractable conflicts for over 25 years. My contribution to the field’s knowledge on this topic is a vast website called Beyond Intractability (www.beyondintractability.org), which I co-directed and co-edited with my husband Guy Burgess. Put together in the early 2000s with over 400 experts on intractable conflict (including Peter Coleman), this website sought to be the “state of the art” statement about how these conflicts are different from more tractable conflicts, and what can be done to confront them constructively. This website is now being updated, but much of the material on it is still as applicable today as it was 8 years ago when it was released.

We will be investigating some of the key ideas from that website, as well as the new and challenging ideas from Coleman’s book *The Five Percent*, and a few other readings that

important ideas to the “intractability dilemma.” By comparing the insights from all of the sources, we will investigate how intractable conflicts are different from other conflicts. We will then consider what we, as individuals, communities, and societies are going to have if we want to successfully approach *any* of these conflicts, and hence be able to tackle *all* the pressing social problems facing the world today.

Course Design and Expectations:

This is a course that requires active student involvement. Although there will be some lectures, most of the class time will be spent in discussions and exercises to enable you to engage directly with the ideas being taught. Students will be expected to:

- Attend all classes unless they have been excused because of illness or another valid reason.
- Do all the readings before class and prepare answers to the discussion questions by Tuesday during weeks 2, 3, and 4. Then respond to at least 3 of your peers' posts by Thursday (so I can read everything before I come down to class).
- Participate actively in face-to-face discussions and in-class exercises
- Work with a team of 2–3 people to complete three conflict maps with annotations about a particular intractable conflict (details below)
- Present these maps in class during week 4
- Write a policy brief by yourself, based on that conflict map, using ideas drawn from the book and applied to your conflict (details also below).
- Present your policy prescriptions in class during week 5

Readings:

We are only reading one book in this class, *The Five Percent* by Peter Coleman. See <http://fivepercentbook.com/> for details. The book should be in the DU bookstore, and is also available from online booksellers, such as Amazon.com. All other readings will be available for free online. Most will come from *Beyond Intractability*; some will be from other sources, but will also be made available online for free. The readings for each week are below, in the week descriptions.

Written Assignments:

1. Reading Discussion: Rather than doing reading reflections, as I have done in this class in the past, I want to copy something that I am now doing with my online class (also on Intractable Conflicts) at S-CAR/George Mason University which is working really well.

I will post several questions related to each week's readings on the discussion board. I would like you to do the readings and post a 300–500 word answer to the discussion board by Tuesday. (You will not be able to see anyone else's answers until you post your own.)

Then I'd also like you to comment on or respond to at least 3 of your peers' posts by Thursday. We will then continue these discussions—to the extent we have time—in class.

2. Conflict Maps: Work with a team of 1 or 2 other students to investigate a particular intractable conflict, and try to apply the ideas from the readings and class presentations to create three conflict maps. This will involve four steps:

1. Choosing a conflict to focus on (hopefully this will happen in class during day 1) and doing background research on that conflict. (Weeks 1, 2, and 3)
2. Developing three conflict maps. (Weeks 2, 3, and 4)

1. The first should illustrate the primary parties and their attributes, interests,

1. The first should illustrate the primary parties and their attributes--interests, needs, relationships, etc. (This is a combination of maps 1 and 3 on Coleman 122.)
 2. The second should illustrate the conflict events that led to escalation or de-escalation (the last map described on pages 122, and for several pages thereafter.)
 3. The third can be any of several different maps.
 - One possibility is a "decision map" (a Guy Burgess invention which I will explain during week two).
 - Another possibility is an expansion of either of your other two maps to another level or layer (concepts also to be introduced during week 2). You might want to do a visions/hopes/dreams/thoughts/feelings/action map (#4 and 5 in Coleman page 122), or a micro or meso level map to supplement the (presumably) macro level map you did for the first one.
3. Annotate and document these maps by:
1. Describing each element (boxes and lines) with a sentence or two explaining what it means
 2. Documenting the source of information of any elements that are less than obvious. (If you say that two parties to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are Israelis and Palestinian Israelis, I would consider that "obvious.")
 3. In addition to the annotations and documentation, write a 9–12 page analysis of the maps (3–4 double-spaced pages per map), identifying "hubs, loops, and energy in the system" (see page 137), potential "local actionables" (page 140) and (if present) dynamics that are already present to diminish the intensity of the conflict (page 141). Finally explain what the map says about the "attractor landscape." What dynamics are pulling the "ball" down into the "valley of intractability?" Are there other attractors in the system that might help "pull ball out" if they were strengthened?
 4. This conflict map and analysis should be done in draft form and be ready for class presentation on week 4. A final, polished version should be ready to hand in on week 5, along with a policy brief, as described below.
 5. The maps and analysis are group activities which can be graded in one or two ways (your choice). You can divide up responsibility and identify who did what (for instance, person A did the maps, person B the analysis, in which case I will grade you on your portion), or you can work on the entire assignment together in which case, I will grade you together. (This is your choice, but please be clear about which option you are choosing.)

3. Policy Briefs: Each person *INDEPENDENTLY* should then use the conflict map to make one or more policy prescriptions, either for

1. a leader on one side of the conflict, or an organization considering intervening as a third party in the conflict.
2. Each of these policy prescriptions should be written up in a 2–3 page brief (1–2 pages per idea)
3. Each should explain one disputant strategy or third party intervention option that could help
 1. reduce current tensions and/or
 2. lay the groundwork for more positive interactions between disputants over the long term and/or
 3. prevent future escalation of hostilities and thus, worsening of the conflict's intractability over the intermediate or long term.
4. Try to draw your ideas from sections III and IV of the book and/or the other readings and document where your ideas came from.
 1. For example, on pg. 95 of the book, Coleman advises "aim to alter patterns, not outcomes." What does this mean for your conflict? How might that be done?
 2. The book has lots of such advice--choose several that seem particularly applicable to your conflict (based on your previous analysis of what is working)

and what isn't, what the local "actionable items are" etc. Use those to form the basis of your policy brief.)

5. Be ready to present **one** of your policy prescriptions in class during Week 5, and hand in all of them in electronic form (maps may be paper-only if preferred), along with final conflict maps and analysis before class as well.

All of these "deliverables" will enable you to "play with" the ideas from the readings and investigate their practical implications for the conflict of your choice. The emphasis here will be on converting theory to practice—examining how theory is used to create practical intervention strategies that are more likely to have constructive outcomes in conflicts that are unlikely to respond well to traditional ADR approaches.

So, to recap,

- There is optional reading for week one (although if you don't do it before class, you still have to do it along with the required readings) for weeks 2–5.
- Discussion board posts and responses to peers are due weeks 2, 3, and 4.
- Conflict maps and analysis need to be ready to present in class during week 4, but don't need to be written up in final form until week 5.
- Conflict maps, analysis, and policy prescriptions need to be finalized in writing and turned in electronically (except for the maps, which can be on paper) before class week 5, and policy prescriptions will be presented in class that day as well.

Grading Summary:

- Discussion board posts: 25%
- Class participation: 15%
- Conflict Map with Annotation, Documentation, and Analysis – 20%
- Conflict Map presentation – 10%
- Policy Briefs – 20%
- Policy Brief presentation – 10%

Preliminary Course Schedule:

Week 1: Sept 12

- **Topics:**
 - Examination of the concept of intractability
 - Sources/causes of intractability.
 - Introduction to BeyondIntractability.org
- **Reading Due Today:**
 - Optional: I realize that everyone may not be able to do reading before the class starts, but this class is so short I want to start quickly. If you have the opportunity to start reading before class, we will be discussing the Introduction and Part I (pp. 1–48) of *The Five Percent today*.
- **Written Assignments Due This Week:** None
- **Class Activities**
 - Introductions
 - Go over syllabus
 - Discussion of the concept of intractability
 - Continuum exercise
 - Break into groups, each group choose a conflict, try to list as many causes of that conflict's intractability as you can

- that connect's intractability as you can.
 - Compare causes between groups
 - During the last hour of week 1, I will give you some time to discuss potential "focal conflicts"--meaning the conflict you want to focus on for the rest of the course. We will discuss options together, and I hope we will be able to choose topics and form teams during class.
 - If time, begin to develop a theory of why some conflicts are more or less intractable than others.
-

Week 2: Sept. 19

- **Topics:**
 - Complex and complicated systems
 - Dynamics of intractable conflicts
 - Introduction to "traditional" conflict mapping
- **Reading Due Today:**
 - 5% Part I (if you hadn't done it before)
 - 5% Part II (through page 108)
 - Wehr: "Conflict Mapping"
http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict_mapping/
 - **Optional:** Conflict Assessment Guides /
 - **Optional:** "Step 1 – Assess the Conflict" in USIP, Managing a Mediation Process Available online at <http://www.usip.org/step-1-assess-the-conflict>
 - **Optional:** Fund for Peace: The Conflict Assessment System Tool (CAST) <http://global.fundforpeace.org/indepth> (Note: Tayma pointed out that the original link was broken and the resource is apparently no longer available all. The link here is the closest I could find--it's not as good, but might still be of some use so I am posting it instead of cutting it out entirely. Either way, was optional.
- **Written Assignments:**
 - Email confirmation of specific project topic with names of team member(s) by noon Monday
 - Original discussion post due by noon Tuesday.
 - Responses to 3 peers (on discussion board) by 8 am Thursday.
- **Class Activities:**
 - Discuss answers to discussion questions.
 - Compare systems-oriented approaches to conflict with more traditional approaches to conflict.
 - Review of alternative approaches to conflict mapping and try doing a parties/interest map in class with your group. Share strategies.

Related Power Points: [Day 2 Power Point](#)

Week 3: Sept. 26

- **Topics:**
 - Conflict Mapping Continued
 - Theories of (or Strategies for) Change
- **Readings Due Today:**
 - 5% Part III (through page 183) **Also:**
 - [Theories of Change](#) by Ilana Shapiro in *Beyond Intractability*.
 - [Strategies of Change](#) Burgess and Burgess
 - Pages 86–87 of Encouraging Effective Evaluation of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities: Towards DAC Guidance by Mary Anderson, Diana

Chigas, and Peter Woodrow, available at the OECD website:

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/52/3/39660852.pdf>

- **Written Assignments Due This Week:**
 - Second discussion board post due by noon Tuesday, and responses to 3 per by 8 am Thursday.
- **Class Activities.**
 - Discussion of discussion questions/answers
 - Practice events mapping and decision mapping
 - Discussion about theories of change and what this implies about interventional intractable conflicts.

Related Power Points: [Day 3 Power Point](#)

Week 4: October 3

- **Topics:**
 - Conflict map presentations
 - Conflict Transformation (ala Lederach) vs. Systemic Peacebuilding (ala Coler)
- **Readings Due Today:**
 - *The 5%, Part IV and Conclusion*
 - "[Conflict Transformation](#)" by John Paul Lederach and Michelle Maiese.
- **Written Assignments Due This Week:** Reading reflections set 3 due by email by 6 Wednesday.
- **Class Activities**
 - Group Conflict Map Presentations
 - Class discussion of discussion board questions/answers.
 - Lecture: Lederach's "Big Picture" of Conflict Transformation
 - If time: in small groups: Apply Lederach's Theory of Conflict Transformation to your own cases

Related Power Points: [Coleman–Applied–plus–Conflict Transformation](#)

Week 5: Oct. 10

- **Topics:** Summing Up--What We Learned, What Questions We Still Have (Lots, I hope)
- **Readings Due Today:** None
- **Written Assignments Due This Week:**
 - Final versions of your conflict maps (printed)
 - Final version of your conflict map annotation, documentation, and analysis (electronic--by email before class--one person/group. Be sure everyone's name is on the documents, however.)
 - Final version of your policy briefs (minimum 3) (**electronic copies emailed before class.**)
- **Class Activities:**
 - Policy prescription presentations.
 - Discussion of the benefits and limitations of Coleman's approach, and comparison of his approaches to (1) traditional mediation and other approaches designed for tractable conflict, and (2) Lederach's conflict transformation approach, and (3) dialogue, problem solving workshops, and other "traditional" approaches for intractable conflicts.

