



Coyote Meets Trainers



Coyote is a curious little creature and is fond of wandering around across Europe to meet trainers in the field. Are you interested in getting a picture on how your colleagues in the field of training think and feel? Then this is your section.

Arne is of German origin and lives in Amsterdam. He recently cut his ties and decided to try the other side of the coin. Having worked for about ten years in posts including international project manager at the Anne Frank House, Amsterdam; vice-chairman of AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen, Germany; at EFIL and, of course, as a trainer on a number of international training courses, he has just moved into the profit-making sector.

Interview

Coyote:

No ringing in your ears yet, Arne?

Arne:

It is as if I were making my umpteenth intercultural exchange. I am also very curious about the enterprise culture in the management sector. They say that it is different. People are credited with fewer social skills. And there are few political considerations and little motivation to work actively for political change. It is not so usual to play with the idea that the behaviour of an individual, a group, a structure, has effects on community life.

Coyote:

Those who work for profit presumably think that we are constantly bleating, without achieving much?

Arne:

Aha, the question about measurability, or about the rumour that, in the non-profit sector, results are not measurable, and therefore do not exist. That's not true. The results are there. It is just difficult to measure them. And that's something I wish to get across: how results which can't be measured can be made visible. You just need to persuade people, encourage them to support your idea.

Coyote:

Convince me that training is worth it in this day and age.

Arne:

Openly trying out mad ideas, testing yourself and questioning yourself, as well as reinventing the wheel. This is often viewed negatively. But it is important so as to work together, so that it is the same wheel that you have invented between you. And who knows, perhaps you can make that wheel even better, even faster? There are things which you have to do yourself, for nobody can explain how to do them. Training multipliers is a long-drawn-out battle for which few resources are available, but the task is a noble one. The task is crystal clear. Sad to say, there are few trainers who dare quite explicitly to give priority to this task: problems of globalisation, the rise in racism and regionalism, the concept of intercultural identity...

Coyote:

Are trainers afraid of their own shadow, then?

Arne:

Trainers have power, an idea which can put fear into your heart! If you take a modest, but realistic, view of ▶



Arne Gillert



yourself and realise that you probably have greater knowledge in certain areas, it is, in my view, one component of training to try to get that knowledge across as well as possible. You must remember at the same time that there are people who know more than you about other fields, and that your knowledge is worthless unless the trainees can make use of it for themselves. Passing on experience need not involve manipulation. You need to put it in a different context and decide which part of your experience you are going to pass on. You must put yourself neither on the same level as, nor on a higher level than, the participants - when I am a participant, I find neither approach satisfactory.

Coyote:

Is it possible to teach intercultural learning?

Arne:

No, you have to use simulation. Or you work in an international group, and then you naturally make better use of the genuine intercultural experience you have at that point in time. When you reflect what you see, and thereby set off trains of thought, you begin to give the participants the courage to call themselves into question. This is certainly a process you can start during training, but you very quickly come to a point where almost everything is relative, everything can be doubted.

Coyote:

On top of that, intercultural learning is always relevant to everything, so is it difficult to keep it apart from other topics during training?

Arne:

Yes, a good example is training based on project management in multilateral projects. You ask trainees what they wish to achieve through their projects, and you teach them how to structure them. But any theory which is based on a linear step-by-step approach to project management is very much culturally defined. Some members of the group react enthusiastically to such a theoretical model, while others fail to appreciate it. That is when you should find it possible to work on intercultural learning. But in accordance with the rules of project management, a step backwards usually has to be taken with the group.

Coyote:

Does training about intercultural learning have different effects than those produced by the study of anthropology or the making of intercultural exchanges?

Arne:

Clearly, training has its strong points. Often, it's a matter of more rapid awareness of models enabling you to understand your own behaviour better, and you receive feedback. You usually gain experience on your own, as during an exchange. Or you study theoretical models, as in anthropological study. We organise training so that you hold up a mirror for trainees to look into. In a secure environment, you might be a little more daring. You are not actually working in a real situation, and you create distance through simulation. You can also practise other models. You can try various ways of acting and reacting to see if they are an option for you, and you can do this with other people.

But we must also adopt modest positions as trainers. I also learn a lot through intercultural learning during everyday life with my Romanian girlfriend. And that certainly involves no structured learning process. I have no trainer by my side who provides feedback. The process is a very down-to-earth one. Everything has to be made clear. Everything, and that's a great challenge, and huge fun. One of the funniest obstacles is the roles of the man and the woman. This experience is far from involving no obligations, for I was brought up in the more emancipated belief that women and men shared the same roles, and that this was best. So I sometimes find in a given situation that I like to react in a more emancipated style than she does. And on other occasions, it is as if I discover very masculine aspects or really dreadfully feministic parts of her behaviour. The result is an emotional challenge to both of us. You find yourself thinking very intensively about yourself. The fact is that you have to spend all your time thinking up solutions, which by definition are not standard solutions. Indeed, on the contrary, the arrangements you come up with are often crazy, sometimes impossible to make head or tail of. Viewed in retrospect, you say "But that's crazy!". But at the time, they ensure that you can get on well with one another. At that moment, practical intercultural learning is in progress.

Coyote:

If people had done more intercultural learning in the thirties, would they have given the Jews more help during the Second World War? Better still, wouldn't it have come to war?

Arne:

No. I have grown a little more cynical about the concept of intercultural learning. The real question is



how to tackle it realistically. If you ask yourself whether this is one way of finding out about yourself and of having the courage to call yourself into question, but also of daring to devise a policy and take action and of helping people on the "other side", I must express some doubt. I do not think that intercultural learning would have made it impossible for the Second World War to happen, with all its racist-inspired atrocities. If you want to combat the far right, I think that has more to do with empowerment than with intercultural learning. But nor is it a question of one or the other. Perhaps it is precisely by combining them that you strengthen both tools: empowerment in an intercultural context. And thus you take one more step towards your goal.

I am firmly convinced that the extreme right wing prospers because of poor policy. When people feel that nothing is changing, and that, on the contrary, corruption is increasing, the circle is complete. People want to hear and see that problems are being raised, studies presented and solutions put forward in plain language, and that real change results. And that makes me think about the principles of the profit-making sector, which we in the non-profit sector find so difficult to cope with. It is really important to achieve results, to change something and to make that change visible.

Coyote:

Training really can make a contribution, but that contribution is limited and often more frustrating than problem-solving?

Arne:

Training is not psychotherapy. So it is not really the intention to create frustration, but a subsidiary aim is to see how people react. I feel sure that frustrations can be helpful, enabling the trainer to show human emotions that can serve as an example. The great problem for me comes when I, as a trainer, am myself the source of frustrations... How can the trainer-trainee relationship then remain an honest one, something which is a basic condition in my view? At that point, as a trainer, you become part of the problem, because you are in a position of power over the trainees and can place them in situations where they have no option but to become frustrated. The main thing then is not to ask why the participants are so frustrated, for that would be very dishonest, in my view.

Coyote:

An example could be helpful here.

Arne:

There is one activity which, through simulation, intends to give people some insight into the persecution of the Jews. As part of this activity, people were told to obey orders and to deport people. Participants did what they were asked to do. In the debriefing afterwards, when the trainees were asked why they had behaved so badly, the discussion was truly awful. What really happened was that advantage was taken of the participants' wish to learn. They accepted the responsibility so as not to falsify your result.

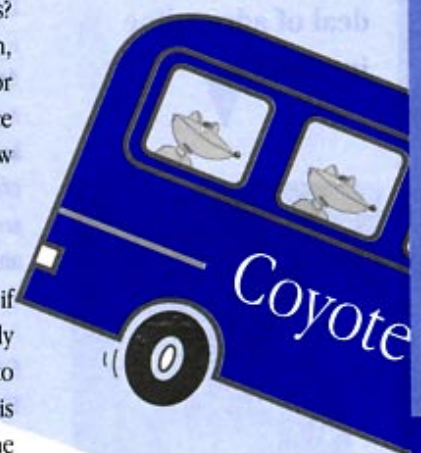
The underlying philosophy is that the "vaccination" technique used is effective. If you let people simulate an aspect of a problem, they spot it in real life more efficiently and more rapidly. But I believe that care must be taken when using play acting of this kind. My problem here is that you have the power, as a trainer, to place people in a situation where they can just display bad behaviour. And then they still have to find a solution. I wish, in my criticism, to take account of participants' own views, which is at least as important as academic discussion. Do they also think about this in ethical terms, or do they regard it as trainers' empty talk among themselves? Perhaps trainees rightly consider that we over-protect them. What image of the participants have I, as a trainer, if I do not believe that they can act for themselves? Have I created an atmosphere where reaction, criticism or refusal is possible? In one way or another, you have instilled in the trainees confidence in the reasonableness of this method. When and how is that confidence abused?

Coyote:

In my opinion, their confidence is abused if intercultural learning is reduced to the purely individual level. Then training is very similar to therapy. The individual is the focus, while the goal is the unanswered questions. Where do you think the boundary lies?

Arne:

What is ethically justified? How far can you challenge people? You are fortunate to work in an intercultural team. Boundaries are often elsewhere. Your team can then be a mirror or a sounding board for the things the trainees get involved in. For how long do you still play a useful role as a trainer and remain within the terms of your contract with the participants? They give you a certain power. As their trainer, you can put them into a difficult situation. If you take a respectful approach, you must know where to draw the line. And there are various fields: ➤



. . . Training in an international context can be like a kind of drug. There is a great deal of adrenaline involved . . .

a "comfort zone", a "challenging zone" and a "danger zone". In my personal view, taking people into the "danger zone" is not in your contract, while the "challenging zone" certainly is.

As a trainer, you also find your place in the zones. Ultimately, you always end up being yourself, and you must have the courage to laugh at yourself. In principle, I expect my trainees also to accept me, with all my limitations. I can only go so far. I have to accept my limitations myself, too.

Coyote:

What are your training needs?

Arne:

I look for methods that do not involve forcing people into behaviour that can be merely negative. Such as role-playing without set roles, which can be very emancipating. The effect must be a little like that of art, able to convert a situation into something more abstract, where it is perfectly possible for the participants to have a different interpretation, and where, first and foremost, creativity is stimulated, and different points of view can be fully, and even physically, experienced.

Coyote:

Do you recognise your trainer's role in your star sign?

Arne:

Apparently I was born in Pisces when Libra was in the ascendant. I am quite happy with that. The balancing of two extremes suits me. That is my aim. Piscean sensitivity and empathy make me get back to myself and allow the group to play the role it needs to at the time.

Coyote:

The new sociologists are now carrying out studies as if they were Euro-nomads, intervening in their professional capacity throughout the continent. They work on a freelance basis, dashing from one European project to another and from one country to the next. Do you also feel like a Euro-nomad?

Arne:

No, I travel a lot, which is fun. But I've learned to hurry back home, to put an end to the process of being away again. My home is important to me: my own place, my girlfriend, my roots, being surrounded by a group of people who do different things from me. Training in an international context can be like a kind of drug. There is a great deal of adrenaline involved. You're on a high, then you're

exhausted. It can be addictive and give you your kicks. When it's over, you can suddenly feel as if you're in a cold turkey situation.

Coyote:

And the famous "bad trip"?

Arne:

They happen, of course, when openness, the willingness to open up in the group, turns out to be feigned. You believed in it, but in fact it didn't exist and you have been fooled.

Arne Gillert can be contacted at:
arne.gillert@usa.net

This interview was conducted by Leen Laconte.

