

Welcome to COYOTE 0

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MARKER The Albatross Dilemma

"Marker" is a regular column in Coyote, written by Mark Taylor, looking at issues in training. Feedback from you will be really welcome.

"During these pauses, which should be prolonged for effect, the Albatrossian man gently pushes the woman's head from time to time downward as she kneels." - quoted from "Albatross" in Donald Batchelder & Elisabeth Warner's Beyond Experience: the experimental approach to cross-cultural education, Experiment Press, 1979.

"Albatross" first came into my life in 1990 when I worked for the first time on a training course in the European Youth Centre. One of the team members said that this simulation game was a standard part of the two days on intercultural learning. She said it was really good for introducing the idea that we all judge situations using our own cultural values and norms. At the time I enjoyed playing it and the participants seemed to get quite a lot out of the discussions afterwards. It worked then, but does it work now?

Perhaps you have used this simulation too - if so, skip this paragraph - if not, here is a summary. Participants are told that they are going to visit a new culture and they will be greeted by representatives of this "Albatrossian culture". They enter a room where (usually) two team members are dressed in sheets, incense may be burning and a circle of chairs awaits them. Men wear shoes and sit on the chairs, women are bare foot and kneel by their side. The Albatrossians don't speak; they click, hiss and hum. Food and drink are offered to the visitors by the Albatrossian woman: she places food in the men's mouths and indicates that the women should take their own food. Everything is done serenely and with great dignity and the pauses (and head pushing) referred to above heighten tension in the room. At the end, the Albatrossians choose the female visitor with the largest feet and leave with her.

As with most experiential exercises, the main value lies in sharing and evaluating reactions and feelings (see [Dirk De Vilder's article](#) in this issue of *Coyote*). Then the facilitator of the discussion reveals that, contrary to most of the participants' conclusions, the Albatrossian society values women above men. The reasoning being that the Earth is sacred; all fruitfulness is blessed and women are one with the Earth. Therefore they are the only ones allowed to have direct contact with the ground, therefore the man pushes her head to the ground to remind her of her sacredness, therefore the man eats first to protect her from harm, etc etc.

You get the picture? Nine years ago, most participants were surprised by these revelations but, generally, they took them in "good spirit" and challenged each other's perceptions. In the intervening years I have not used

this simulation very much - others appealed to me more.

Sometimes it seemed to me to lack real possibilities for participants to act and there was the danger that the revelations at the end could leave participants feeling stupid. Some trainers claimed that this exercise should not be used in a "European" context as it contains too many "exotic" cultural references... Still, recently, I've seen Albatross used in one Youth for Europe training course and chose to use it in another. Both times with pretty explosive "results". A sizeable minority of both sexes left the Albatross room in a state of considerable anger:

this is disgusting!

the women are totally oppressed!

how could the men follow the Albatrossian example and push down the heads of the women next to them?

I feel like I want to leave this course now!

how dare you put us through something like that?

why didn't we react more physically to this injustice?

After the revelations about the Albatross culture, these participants expressed their feelings powerfully:
is that supposed to be a joke?

I don't care about your explanations - this was just too horrible.

Look, I was sitting next to someone with whom I had a really intense discussion at lunchtime and then you put me in a situation where I'm under pressure to treat her badly and push her head down - I can't talk about cultural perceptions after that!

These reactions resulted in many many discussions - also in the informal parts of the programme - about how to introduce issues of cultural perception. Where are the moral limits? What happens if the trainers' aims for a particular method produce reactions which are extremely different to those they expect? Is that a disaster, or is it wonderful precisely because it is so different? Society changes and our methodologies have to change with it. I think we are seeing much stricter limit-setting these days, with people being much more open about what they can and cannot accept about other cultural value systems. This must affect the ways we are approaching intercultural learning.

Discussing with a couple of trainers the other week, I found I was not alone in seeing major problems in using Albatross these days.

How about you?

Contact Mark: brazav@yahoo.com