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Youth-Training-Europe, Issue 0 (July 1999)

Intercultural learning in European youth work

Perspectives on the east-west interface
by Juliana Roth, Munich

I. Intercultural learning between theory and practice

Intercultural learning is fashionable at present. Talking about integration and tolerance is the done thing for speakers before European audiences, and intercultural modules are part of every self-respecting further training programme. This applies just as much in big companies or banks that have recently merged as in government youth work, development aid, the diplomatic service and European training programmes. The reasons given for this trend are usually external political and economic factors, the most well known of which are globalisation, refugee movements, crisis prevention, the expansion of information technologies and the growth of supranational structures. However, internal factors such as knowledge accumulation and a demand for physical and intellectual mobility also appear to be contributing to the development of new ?rules of etiquette? for dealing with cultural diversity.

What is intercultural learning? The term conceals various ranges of content, didactic concepts and pedagogical approaches that come from different disciplines but have one common feature: before being established as the subject of academic research and study, they were largely developed on a practical level in relation to contemporary socio-political debate. Education for foreigners, development didactics and exchange research all try to offer solutions to concrete social problems from the angle of their discipline. The constant changes in the theoretical concepts of intercultural learning are the result of the close relationship between theory and practice: depending on the prevailing geopolitical and sociocultural parameters, the problem regarded as most important has to be redefined and fundamental questions about the subjects, objectives, content and methods of learning (*?Who learns what, why and how??*) have to be reformulated.

In Germany, for example, the educational concepts of the discipline *Ausländerpädagogik* (*education of foreigners*) introduced in the 1970s were a response to the positioning of the non-German migrant workers (? *guest workers?*) at that time and an attempt to develop approaches for educating these ?guests?. As the status of the ?guest workers? changed to that of ethnic groups who were permanently resident in the country the relevant approaches were subjected to increasing criticism, which led to the discipline being opened up ? under the name of *?intercultural education?* ? to the new task of preparing people for life in a multicultural society.

Similarly, the approaches of *Austauschforschung* (research in international exchange) and the closely related area of European youth work were based on the political and programmatic goal of international understanding. The concept of "international understanding" stems from the post-war era in Europe and served

as an effective model for cross-border co-operation for several decades. Until the start of the nineties, it therefore shaped all areas of intercultural educational practice ? both implicitly and explicitly. Its core principles were the ideas of equality (*?all people are equal?*) and universalism of values (*?all people essentially have the same fundamental values?*). This meant that problems of understanding between people from different cultures could be solved or prevented simply by dealing with each other sensitively and in a spirit of unprejudiced goodwill. The methodological implementation of this approach placed great emphasis on cultural similarities and the development of unprejudiced minds. Teachers did not need to learn any specific methods for cultural education and neither they nor learners had to bother with knowledge about other cultures. Instead, cultural differences were a taboo subject ? a situation that still shapes the thinking of many teachers and educators today, albeit often subconsciously and unintentionally.

II. A new model: cultural differences as a resource for intercultural learning

The environment in which intercultural encounters now take place has shown that educational theory and practice also need to adopt new approaches. Compared with the past, the daily challenges of intercultural living are now vastly more diverse and can no longer be tackled with the simple model of "international understanding". The growth in the number of contacts between cultures and in the presence of otherness in our daily lives has changed the fundamentals of how we deal with the latter. Encountering otherness is always accompanied by a heightened awareness of the significance of culture as a determining factor, this being reflected, among other things, in:

- a greater sense of the similarities and differences between cultures;

- a clearer awareness of the features of people?s own cultures and lifestyles;

- decreasing willingness on the part of cultural minorities to accept the parameters set by the majority;

- and emphasis on people?s pride in their own (ethnic or national) cultures.

Moreover, while acceptance of western values and cultures as attractive models (belief in modernity, progress, technology, emancipation of the individual, etc) went unquestioned as the way ahead for large sections of the world?s population until only recently, we can now see people in many different regions turning back to their own cultural roots. The causes of this cultural emancipation and increasing confrontation with the ?west? are very complex; one of them may lie in the existential crisis in western societies that has been accompanied by economic downturns and upsets in political and social systems. This factor is certainly of great importance to the shaping of relations between eastern and western Europe.

This general increase in the relevance of cultural differences means a change of paradigm for *intercultural learning*, as it necessarily involves having to face up to the challenges of education for dealing with cultural difference. This produces an extremely difficult situation for practical educational work. Although cultural differences are accepted, they cannot be defined in concrete terms and remain vague and difficult to grasp for teachers and learners alike (apart from cultural anthropologists and ethnologists). At the same time, the continuing effect of the international understanding approach means that the educational process is often weighed down by a morally based desire to "improve the world", which has an impeding and counterproductive effect on professional intercultural learning.

It is learners from the social pedagogy and youth work sectors that are most affected by this change in paradigm. Their professional backgrounds mean that they are more likely than others to wish to avoid discrimination and accordingly to stress similarities in their relations with people from other cultures, placing emphasis on ?tolerance? and ?respect?. The organisational structure and orientation of youth work also strengthen this desire to "improve the world" and at the same time unintentionally trigger resistance to intercultural learning of a kind that is based on cultural differences.

All of these factors prove in turn that intercultural learning cannot be carried out independently of social reality. Every theoretical unit (such as formulating educational objectives, defining educational content, generating motivation and determining educational methods) must be based on practical application and prove itself there. The experiences of today?s intercultural environment suggest that we should adopt an educational process that teaches people to recognise differences and make sensible use of the knowledge acquired. Even when perceived and described in stereotypical form, cultural differences are not negative in themselves. What matters more is learning to deal with them constructively and in an ethically responsible manner.

In this way, cultural differences can become a valuable *resource* if approached correctly. In intercultural learning, it is best to approach them from the angle of one?s own culture, which means that it is best for each intercultural learning module to begin by raising awareness of the learners? own cultures.

Intercultural learning is thus understood as a developmental process which is centred on the individual and whose aim is to bring about a change in individuals? understanding and acceptance of foreign cultural practices. The focus of the learning process is therefore placed explicitly on the *subjective experience* of cultural differences. The key role is played by the individual concerned, i.e. cultural differences are regarded as aspects of the perception and interpretation (*?cultural lenses?*), feeling, thinking and behaviour (*?cultural character?*) of the individual. The learning process is seen as a continuum of several phases through which learners progress.

The phases are determined in accordance with the learners? attitudes to the differences that exist between their culture and the other culture. The process begins with the state of ethnocentrism (on the part of the learners) and ends at the point where the learners have acquired a *?stereophonic cultural perspective?*, meaning that they have incorporated the cultural differences into their own behaviour patterns and simultaneously possess the knowledge and skills of their own and the other culture. It is obvious that this is an ideal situation, which no doubt is achieved only rarely in practice. Acting according to the ?rules? of two or more cultures at the same time causes stress and is perceived as an emotional burden. Nevertheless, educational models based on this fundamental principle have proved to be very useful in practice ? even if they do not produce ideal results, their usefulness in giving a structure to educational modules is demonstrated every time a course in intercultural learning is held.

III. Intercultural learning for the integration of eastern and western Europe

What are the implications of the above for intercultural learning at the interface between eastern and western Europe?

In this section, I should like briefly to present some key aspects of my experience from relevant training work.

I will use ?east? and ?west? as terms that transcend geography and refer to the pre-1990 political and ideological division of the continent. This somewhat imprecise definition ties in not only with common usage but also with the political and organisational activities of many European organisations. All former communist countries including the successor states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia thus belong to the ?east?, with the consequence that ?east Europeans? at European integration seminars include participants from such diverse countries as, for instance, Poland, Croatia, Russia, Armenia, and even Kirgizstan.

The first dilemma of intercultural learning in mixed east-west groups is to be found in this generalized and simplified view of the ?east?. The problems are compounded still further by the unambiguous value judgements expressed, for instance, in the comparative forms of the adjectives: ?more western? almost always means a positive comparison, while ?more eastern? has negative connotations.

Between the two lies the boundary between ?west? and ?east?, which is by no means new. Its origins date back to the 18th century, when the relations between the two parts of the continent were defined in pairs of opposites (*civilised versus barbaric, rational versus emotional, factual versus mythologising, individual versus collective, past versus future oriented, progressive versus backward*), with the west increasingly perceiving them as a west-east divide. New dimensions were added to the historic divide following the collapse of communism. Inspired by popular evolutionary theories, west Europeans were soon saying that their eastern neighbours ?had not caught up yet? and encouraging them to keep on working ?to join Europe?. In many cases, east Europeans felt that this was a ?colonialist? attitude and retreated into positions of refusal.

The east-west interface is usually perceived as being highly asymmetric. The stronger this perception, however, the likelier the partners are to hide behind ethnocentric barriers and block the progress of the learning process. Although the asymmetry mostly remains invisible, it has a lasting impact on every joint event and supplies criteria according to which the actions of the respective partners are assessed, with one side often thinking *?They know everything anyway and do not want to learn anything about us?* and the other taking the view that *?They are passive and contribute nothing at all?*. This hinders communication and results in higher rather than lower ?psychological barriers?.

Practical experience of training also shows that the participants register and deal with the asymmetry in east-west relations in different ways. While west European participants mainly adhere to the international understanding approach without much further thought and focus on similarities with their east European counterparts (e.g. in the fields of information technology, youth culture, media consumption and sport), the east Europeans feel that they are being passed over and their cultural features are being ignored. They have the impression of being confronted with western cultural dominance, which is subliminal and perhaps unintended and cannot be openly criticised for reasons of politeness, but which does ultimately come down to the imposition of the more powerful culture.

The different assessment of the asymmetry of east-west relations by east and west Europeans suggests that the two groups do not have the same approach to cultural differences. Support for this argument can easily be found in the many theoretical studies of intercultural communication, as they provide sufficient evidence of the culturally specific approaches to otherness in individualistic/universalistic and collectivistic/particularistic societies. The individualistic belief that the same value standards should apply to everyone comes up against the view ? which is equally valid from the collectivist perspective ? that value standards for people?s own groups and for other groups should be different. It is clear that these culturally specific approaches have an effect on the ways cultural differences are perceived and dealt with.

So what is the adequate didactic approach to seminars and workshops with east and west European participants? What is the best learning environment, how should learning situations be organised, what educational content should be provided for and what methods should be employed? Practical experience of intercultural encounters and research on the matter point clearly in one direction: only adopting an open approach to cultural differences and learning how to deal with them constructively can provide a stable basis for intercultural learning. This solution is not culturally neutral ? it is closer to the profile of the more or less collectivist east Europeans. West Europeans have some difficulties with this approach, as it runs counter to their ?cultural profile?. However, if they are genuinely interested in the integration of eastern and western Europe, they should take up this challenge.

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