

# Welcome to COYOTE 0

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## INTERCULTURAL LEARNING To walk in your shoes...

The Council of Europe and the European Commission decided to organise a training course on intercultural learning and conflict management within this year's partnership programme. A reason for looking back to the training course on intercultural learning that was run last year at the European Youth Centre. How did it feel to participate in this course? Claudia Schachinger describes her experience and what it meant for her.

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### Training Course on Intercultural Learning *by Claudia Schachinger*

Have you ever thought about yourself as an iceberg, where a good part is hidden beneath the water surface? The Training Course on Intercultural Learning (June 1998, Strasbourg) was full of metaphors like this: Flowers and onions, blindfolded and leg-tied travels, cakes and fishes and all types of drawings tried to discern and approach this mysterious term of Intercultural Learning. A difficult exercise. We seemed to move in concentric circles around our topic, coming sometimes closer, sometimes even farther away. It was a learning process, a never-ending one - and to discover this, that's maybe what it is about.

Intercultural Learning - one of these up-to-date terms in international youth work. And like all terms, too often used, they might lose meaning. One reason why the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe had a Consultative Meeting in spring 1998 in order to evaluate and plan its work in this area. The Training Course „Intercultural Learning" was one consequence and a pilot project, aiming to bring approaches from different organisations together and to develop new ideas.

The „theory" of intercultural learning seemed simple to work on: The common elaboration of terms like „culture", „identity" and „stereotypes" in plenary discussions, exercises and group work. A deepening on pedagogy, intercultural learning-competencies or communication models. New knowledge to digest, in an attempt to integrate it, complementary to previous experiences.

### East-West dialogue?

But - unfolding our theoretical knowledge and experience in plenary - we did not realise at all the differences in our own participation and ways of expression, neither did we ask for the reasons. Nobody thought that using the same words, we might have had different meanings in mind. Or that it pointed right at the heart of our

subject, when always the same people were intervening in plenary as they were used to. And even very clear articulations (one participant from Eastern Europe: „We learnt for 40 years to keep silent.") did not lead us to address these issues.

There was a working group that wanted to develop a project on East-West dialogue. Was it by chance that nobody from the West participated? And as it came to present their contribution, some jokes seemed enough to provoke hurt feelings. Has anybody asked how hurt other people - the more silent ones - might have been at other moments? I at least asked myself once again how thin and sensitive the layers are with which Europe has covered its wounds.

### **not visible and hardly explicable**

There was this wonderful symbol already mentioned, the iceberg, which hides all our cultural values and attitudes, the not visible and hardly explicable elements of our identity, the conceptions and notions we have, the ideals and patterns we feel adherent to. Yes, we liked this comparison a lot. But did it really bring us to reflect upon our own behaviours? And why did some of us react so defensive when asked if one or the other comment made might have been linked to our roots and backgrounds?

We touched important issues. But why do I still have the feeling we remained in a silent agreement on the surface of discussions? Nobody asked seriously to discern what might have been behind one or the other conclusions of our games and exercises. We preferred the models and the methods (which are easily considered as answers) to the personal doubts and confrontations (which could imply open questions).

I see the chance to learn from this experience. And I recognised moments and elements in this training course which happen everywhere and despite all good intentions, in probably a lot of our organisations, institutions, bodies and meetings so concerned with "Intercultural Learning".

Every encounter at European or international level implies intercultural learning. It is not just any subject, it is at the heart of every interaction. Maybe it is therefore just a logical consequence that we are stepping every time again automatically in already well-known traps: The longing for harmony and the search for security. The survival of the fittest. The desire for self-representation and affirmation. The misunderstandings of terms. The search for easy answers. The mechanism of auto-defence and the game of power...

### **through the encounter of difference**

Intercultural learning is a sensitive process. And the person who deals with it is part of this process. We cannot pretend to develop wonderful theories without questioning our own behaviours, our own patterns. And - especially if we want to be trainers and specialists in this field, as many engaged in youth organisations do - we need to develop the courage to put the questions to ourselves, to confront our own "icebergs" first. And to believe that our own learning process never ends. That we can learn from everybody we meet, everywhere, once we are ready to listen, open to change.

In this sense, I'd like to share a model with you I came to know in the training course (despite my former speech, there is a lot to learn from models if you do not take them for granted).

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It is from Milton Bennett <sup>(1)</sup>, and he describes the intercultural learning process in six steps: From ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism (denial - defence - minimisation - acceptance - adaptation - integration). It is a permanent process that we move in, a never-ending effort to undertake.

Bennett tackles a number of points we often tend to forget, but which are important to consider. For example, that meaning can just be created through the encounter of difference. Or that we are easily seduced to bury differences under the weight of similarities. That a real intercultural dialogue preconditions the ability to distance us from the idea that everybody should have the same universal values and principles. And that adaptation would really mean a temporary shift of our frame of references, to „walk in the shoes of somebody else“, if you want.

He finally mentions a sentence I really like: A multicultural person would not be simply a person sensitive to other cultures, but a person „who is always in the process of becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context“.  
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Not just such sentences made this training course deserve its name.

### **the capacity to question and to doubt**

A lot of discussion in our so diverse and colourful group enabled new meaning and new considerations. Despite all difficulties and limitations (which are a realistic part of this subject and a part of all learning processes), the course enriched the understanding of intercultural learning and showed the enormous potentials and working fields behind this expression.

And it indicated clearly the direction and sensibilities we have to take serious in our work and our encounters at European level: never to lose the capacity to question and to doubt, first of all our own perceptions and reactions. Never to give up the efforts to review the patterns of thinking and behaviour we are used to. To believe in the capacity of development and constructive changes. To be humble, sensitive and curious in our approach.

To appreciate differences and to remain in permanent search for a constructive „conflict culture“. To trust in our roots and to see the other as a chance to discover, develop and complement our being. And many, many other things...

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### **FOOTNOTES:**

(1) Milton J. Bennett, "A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity" in: International Journal of Intercultural Relations, Vol. 10, pp. 179 – 196, 1986

(2) Ibid. p. 186.