

Ethics in Training

Head in the Stars but Feet on the Ground

Or How Can the Experience of an International Meeting be Transferred to a Local Context?



Of those who have participated in international meetings, who has not felt the special atmosphere of the intercultural group and the sadness of saying goodbye to each other at the end of the activity? International meetings can indeed seem like a world apart, and yet one of their most essential objectives is the transfer of the experience to the participants' own realities and local communities. This article presents some reflections on why and how to integrate the local dimension into international events.

“Leave with a rucksack on light on your back, come back with the weight of it on your shoulders”
(Conseil Régional Rhône-Alpes)

An international meeting, whether it is an exchange between young people, a training course or a seminar, is a special forum. It is what we - trainers, leaders or international exchange organisers – try to promote in a more or less intuitive way. Add to that a pinch of intercultural group dynamics, ice-breakers and energisers, animated sessions in work and discussion groups, the farewell party ... There you have the ideal conditions for the course or exchange to acquire that timeless quality which makes it a world apart.

What I mean by that is that you have only to see the emotional, often tearful, goodbyes among participants to realise that, for them (and for us!), the week they have spent together seemed like a different reality, a powerful time of sharing which is difficult to leave behind.

That is the strength of these meetings, but it can also be destructive: we, as trainers and leaders, have the power to gather these human beings in a collective living space and help them do things, think and act together. This oblique power which we have can be

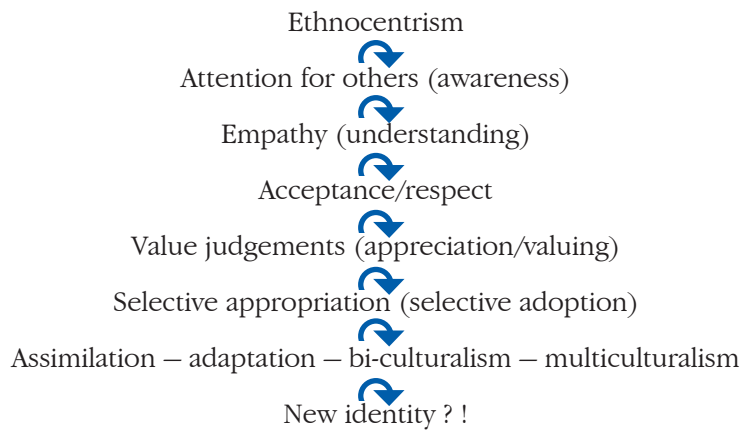
dangerous: since our actions relate to human beings, they affect the feelings and emotions.

Yet what could be more appealing than the concept of an “intercultural learning process” which is so dear to us (see Béatrice Burgherr’s model of intercultural learning below)!? It seems that, in some cases, on the small scale of our week-long meeting or course, some participants move quickly from ethnocentrism to appropriation and, intoxicated by exceptional group dynamics, reach the stage of total adaptation which can lead to the creation of a new identity. Let us take the example of a young participant or trainee who is very enthusiastic, open to others, a little more emotional than the average. If the organising team does its job well, if the group dynamics play their role, there is a good chance that the young person will give him or herself 200% to the meeting, sleeping little, sharing, receiving a great deal. She/he will cheerfully go through the stages of empathy, acceptance and judgment – eventually experiencing a strong feeling of belonging to a micro-society, a family with its own rules, values, joys and sorrows! The only problem is, the micro-society and the new group identity have a short, intense lifetime. And there you are, trainer or leader, a victim of your own success (and especially the success of the group).

by Sylvain Abrial



THE INTERCULTURAL LEARNING PROCESS



Structured learning situation necessary?

Source: Overhead projection slide by Beatrice Bugberr, adapted from Margaret Pusch, A Cross Cultural Training Approach, Illinois, 1979. In: Training Courses Resource File Vol. 3, "Intercultural Learning – Basic Texts", Second Edition, Council of Europe, European Youth Centre 1991, p. 10.

Is it therefore up to us, at that moment, to deal with the traumas of separation? No, because we are neither psychologists nor psychoanalysts. No, because in the end they have to learn by experience.

It's true! However, it is our duty to place the meeting or training course in context: the week spent together has certainly been very rich in emotions and learning but, after all the emotion, the participants will each individually return to their daily lives, to that which makes them who they are – their local environment, their familiar space. That is the baggage they came with and they take this same baggage - even if it is heavier or newer - with them when they leave.

It is no coincidence that the emphasis in the objectives of the Community programmes is on this local aspect. As trainers or leaders, our role (if need be!) is to accompany the young people – the participants – on their return home. If they do not come through the stage of emotion, their experience will lose its quality as an agent of lifelong learning.

That is why the local dimension needs to be integrated into our teams of trainers and leaders. How?

When determining the expectations and make-up of the group at the beginning of the meeting, asking the participants to describe themselves as individuals by talking about their daily lives, hobbies, familiar environments and their past will help each one understand "why I am what I am" and particularly "what I think I can contribute to the group". Whatever the methods used to define expectations or make individual presentations, it is vital to put them on display, accompanied by the traditional Polaroid photo or other memento. This will remind everyone throughout the meeting that, before being an intercultural group, we are also individuals engaged in exploring and discovering others.

When the final evaluations are carried out, it is essential to refer back to the expectations, look back and ask ourselves the questions "What have we achieved together?" and especially "What individual expectations have you met?", "What frustrations were there?" and "What surprises were there?". In this way, each person will be able to reflect once more as an individual. In short, we can guide the participants towards reflecting on their personal involvement in the meeting: "How much of yourself have you given to the group?", "Do you usually give so much of yourself?", "What was the strength of our group?". By asking these questions directly or indirectly, we can reflect together on the fact that the intensity of a meeting derives not only from the quality of the individuals who make it up, but also from the time factor, the fact that we all know "it won't go on forever". That, unfortunately, is the artificial side of the meeting: this perfect world, this ideal micro-socie-

ty has a particular quality: you feel free there, you've left behind your daily material worries and conflicts... so you can give of yourself 200%!

To avoid being "dream-breakers", we also have to stimulate motivation: for example, suggest to the participants that they organise and host another meeting, an evaluation session – at home in their own region, which will enable them to experience or revive the magic of the intercultural meeting, but also integrating the constraints and challenges linked to their local environment.

We also have to remind the participants of their role as "intercultural ambassadors". If their experience has captured their imagination, a discussion can be conducted with them on the question "How do I apply what I've experienced and learned to my professional life, my organisation, the young people in my area, schools, associations...?" – so as to promote the building of a Europe in which they are the agents. By discussing various methods (photo exhibition, personal report of experience, compilation of methods and resources used), we can also encourage them to make local contacts with different partners who might be interested in hearing about their experiences as part of a Europe day, a local training course, an anti-racism event for children, etc.

When we are lucky enough to be able to stay in touch with some of the participants from our region, we can exchange experiences, see each other again in a more local context and organise a post-meeting review, for example.

Finally, we can use ourselves as an example: "Before being a trainer in an international team, I am French, from such-and-such a place, and at the end of the session I will also go home to my daily life". Let us therefore try occasionally to dispel the illusion of the team of multilingual trainers moving in "elevated European spheres"!

There are many ways of transferring experiences gained in an international group to a local and individual level and it seems to me vital to do so. The international meeting is, above all, a collective experience lived by individuals. To convince the most sceptical of the benefit of such experiences, we must be prepared to share our experiences outside the group, because the individuals in the group have already been convinced.

We should be aware of our power to make and break dreams and allow the meeting to work its magic, but we should also be capable of demystifying if need be. In this way, we will all be able to keep our feet on the ground.

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