

“Are we gurus and missionaries who are spreading the word”?

Keeping Our Feet on the Ground.

Having a go at being a freelance trainer in non-formal education is not an easy thing to do, even if you already have a large number of contacts and a certain amount of experience. That is why, at the beginning, I often wanted to give up. Then suddenly I received an incredible offer.

Just before the end of 2000, Paolo Bernasconi, a friend I had worked with a great deal a few years previously, who is now a delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), proposed that I work with him in Central Asia on “Leadership skills and preparation for conflict situations” training courses for volunteers and employees of national and regional branches of the Red Crescent.

These volunteers and employees are regularly confronted with the need to manage natural disasters, but the region, and especially the Fergana Valley, is also threatened by confrontations and conflicts, mainly involving armed Islamist groups. Although these volunteers and employees are well trained in disseminating and promoting the work of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, they often lack the basic management and leadership skills required to recruit and motivate volunteers and persuade political and financial decision-makers of the importance of such activities. It also seemed important for the ICRC to address issues concerning attitudes towards people from other cultures.

In spring 2001, we ran three training courses:

▶ in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, on the Uzbek border in the Fergana valley. This course involved Uzbek and Kyrgyz participants from the Fergana valley, Uzbeks from Surkhandarya (in the south) and Tajiks. The participants, who were between 16 and 30 years old, were mainly volunteers from regional branches of the Red Crescent and youth co-ordinators from these branches.

This course had the highest number of participants – 36 – and lasted the longest – six days. It was the most important one because it covered the region which regularly suffers incursions by Islamist groups. The Red Crescent must therefore always be prepared to deal efficiently with the evacuation of the wounded, population displacement and the distribution of essentials.

▶ in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital, with 22 Kyrgyz and Kazakh participants;
▶ in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, with 28 Uzbek and Turkmen participants.

These other two courses lasted only 4 days and had a more condensed programme than the one in Osh. A wider range of participants was involved: although many of them were national co-ordinators, there were also volunteers. Some participants were more experienced than others (some had been volunteers or salaried employees for several years – more than 30 years in some cases – whereas others had just become volunteers over the previous few days).

As I have always been attracted by the idea of new experiences and new voyages, I didn't hesitate. However, I soon began asking myself lots of questions:

▶ What would it be like to work with Paolo, when the last course we had worked on together had taken place six years ago and I had more or less continued in the same job whereas he had taken another path, doing humanitarian work in the field, often far from Europe?

▶ I also wondered about the personal development of one of the team members, who had participated in a long-term training course I had organised several years previously and would now be one of the trainers.

▶ On the face of it, the aims of the Red Cross, the ICRC, corresponded to my ideals but what would happen once I was face to face with its volunteers, once I was “involved”?

▶ Finally, the place I was to go to for five weeks was for me a land of dreams (I was brought up on tales of Marco Polo) but also of uncertainty. I knew that the region had been part of the USSR but what was the situation in that part of the world ten years after the various republics had gained their independence? I also knew that the region had a large Muslim population but that Islamic networks opposed the parties in power.

by Corinne Grassi

*Corinne with a Tajik participant
in front of a Kyrgyz Yurk (tent)*



In short, I was not setting out on a training course like those I was accustomed to, even though Paolo had asked me to prepare basic subjects for the training of group leaders, such as group dynamics, working in a team, project management, intercultural learning, recruitment and working with volunteers.

The first challenge came from the briefing with the head of the delegation: we were told not to focus too much on human rights, as this could put national organisations in a difficult position, and always to bear in mind the three main principles of the ICRC: prevention, neutrality and impartiality.

The second challenge was to decide how to address the issues I wanted to discuss with the participants, whose cultural, historical and social background I knew nothing about. I had run several courses in Russia and Bulgaria and I very quickly noticed similarities (the desire to find a perfect and infallible solution, an eagerness for lectures or games which would teach them everything they needed to know, but little desire for more “intermediary” methods). Nevertheless, I constantly felt that I was walking on eggs within the various groups I worked.

I therefore needed to find a new approach, which would allow me to talk about intercultural matters to participants living in a region where it quickly became obvious that there was a significant cultural mix (a number of our participants were children of mixed marriages and some had grandparents who were of other nationalities) and where communism and Islam had co-existed for several years. There are many nationalities in the region and things are not as easy as one might like them to be in countries where people are seeking their own national identity, heroes and national anthems, etc, ... whereas the borders had little significance only a few years ago. Turks have migrated into the region and are now running prosperous businesses whereas Russian immigrants are having increasing difficulty in finding employment. It is not always a good thing to have the nationality of a neighbouring country. In a region where each person's identity is the result of many influences, on account of the wide range of nationalities, religions and political systems past or present, I often wondered whether talking about my identity actually helped people understand the complexity of their own identity. Would discovering that they had ancestors of the same nationality, who had fought to uphold the same values, help to bring them together? How did they perceive me when I talked to them about working with and sharing the lives of gypsies in different countries, about promising projects I had devised together with groups of young

people that almost nobody wanted to work with? Did they think that I mixed with a strange set of people and that I ought to be distrusted if I said that I had helped set up projects in Palestine?



In this region culture means more than just nationality, as communism itself seems to be a culture which has had a strong influence and is still very much present. Although young people, extremely few of whom belong to any kind of organisation, often prefer to forget, the

older generation are still very attached to the past and often long for the return of the communist period, when young people had an “education”. This gave rise to heated debate between those who claimed that the komsomols were a genuine voluntary service and that patriotism was an important value and those who dared criticise that period. It was during this sort of discussion, when I always had the feeling of being on a very slippery slope and asked myself just how far we could take the discussion, that I became aware of my position on these courses. As I was a foreigner, it was sometimes easier for me to prompt the participants and to “provoke” them into discussing subjects which still seem to be taboo. I was able to make them realise that they were all sitting round the same table, where the atmosphere was positive, whereas they might find themselves facing one another as enemies if a conflict were to break out.

Intercultural learning, thinking about differences and opening their minds to other points of view were certainly the greatest novelty for all the trainees. Although I used traditional “models” (e.g., iceberg and onion and comfort and panic zones), I had the impression of coming from another planet when giving examples of my work and especially when sharing experiences with groups of young people with whom few people have worked so far. Fortunately, I quickly found many examples which meant something to the participants so that I was able to give practical as well as theoretical examples. I had hardly arrived in Central Asia when I started making one social blunder after another – when tea was served, bread shared, etc. I discovered many traditions like Navrouz, the New Year, which is celebrated on the first day of spring with an incredible quantity of food, and I began to understand a number of social and cultural codes. I described all of these personal experiences to the participants and this helped many of them to realise that it was not because things had always been like that in their part of the world that they were necessarily the same in other parts. Most of the participants realised that they had learned a great



deal from their neighbours and their traditions and from other cultures and that these cultures were both similar and different. Although my colleagues later told me that they had heard that these sessions had been “courageous”, had “rocked the boat” and had made some participants think a great deal and realise that they could enhance mutual understanding, others did not hesitate to proclaim loudly that they didn’t need to talk about intercultural matters.

Indeed, one of the things I asked myself most throughout the experience was to what extent you can combat resistance (see Mette Bram’s article in Coyote #3) when you come from another culture and perhaps have a different way of thinking from the group you are dealing with. What do you do when this resistance comes from the oldest members, who seem to have authority over the group, whereas the younger members might have something different to say? And then, after all, I was the one who felt that there was resistance but what did they feel? What right do I have to “preach” what I consider to be the basis for opening up to others, for living together in peace, to people who claim that they are living together without any friction? The approach I adopted was always to be as humble as possible and try not to impose my way of seeing things, while encouraging the trainees to think about how I had understood, perceived or interpreted this or that. I simply tried to share my experience of other countries and other groups by trying to make myself understood through specific examples, in the knowledge that how far you can go depends on the group you are dealing with (some participants found it difficult to understand how I could talk about identity if I didn’t feel “patriotic” and if I didn’t defend my national anthem; nor was it easy to take as an example work with groups of people who had different sexual orientations).

Likewise, I constantly asked myself questions about what I was trying to “transmit” and share through the various themes I was responsible for, and had doubts about this. For many of the participants, the courses presented the opportunity to meet volunteers from other regions and nationals of other countries for the first time. Everything seemed to be new to most of the participants but I never really understood whether the novelty lay in the approach or the themes. One thing is certain and that is that the participants lapped up every word I said as if I were a sort of “guru” or “missionary spreading the word” and that it was easy for me to “dazzle” and “fascinate” them because I came from somewhere else and had travelled a little whereas most of the participants had not undergone much training and thought that other places were a paradise where everything was possible.

By my standards, very few of the trainees were capable of analysing examples or drawing together the various strands of a theme, particularly when asked about projects they had taken part in and about their commitment as volunteers and what they intended to do after their training course. It was rather as if I were forcing them out of a “mould” so that they would “accept” that it was possible to work as a team

and trust others.

This brought me to another series of questions (which I had already asked myself during other courses but which seemed to me to be blatant during this new experience) concerning the entire exercise and especially the impact of such courses, which are only a drop in the ocean in this part of the world.

How can you find the right words to use when you are unfamiliar with the context and even the local culture(s)? To what extent are the approaches and methods appropriate to the context and, above all, how can the trainees be helped to progress further so that they can really use what they have learned “intelligently” in their own context? What can be done to ensure that trainees do not consider themselves experts on subjects which they have often just discovered and have studied only very superficially? What can be done to make them understand that training is only a beginning to thinking in a different way, to seeing things from another angle so that they have a better understanding of the way certain things function and will perhaps adopt different working methods? How can the step from “theory” to actual practice be made? How can participants be encouraged to think about their personal development and to be more objective towards the model they are familiar with?

I am aware that I have asked a large number of questions and I am not at all sure I know the answers. Indeed, I am not sure that it is necessary to answer them fully. I am merely mentioning them because I think it was important that I did ask myself such questions and I believe that in some way they helped me to “keep my feet on the ground”, not to cut myself off from the trainees, and to try and find ways of making myself understood and of encouraging them to think.

I believe that my “bursting into” into the daily lives of the participants can only be useful to them (if indeed it was useful) if there is some kind of follow-up. If the participants themselves fail to take the initiative of continuing the work, a great deal of work will be required with each of them to review what they said, heard and learned.

Participants wearing traditional dress during an evening together



It is impossible to train everyone and, ideally, training should be provided, in part, by “locals”, who are more familiar with the actual situation, the local context and its challenges. Most of the participants seemed to understand the importance of their role in passing on the message and their responsibility to transmit what they had learned. But if they are really to absorb the basic concepts, it will probably be necessary for many of them to review a number of terms and concepts such as project management, team leadership (why are volunteers necessary, how should their work be monitored, how can they be trained, encouraged to stay on and motivated?), encounters with foreigners and their cultures, the acceptance of differences and the importance of diversity, and the role of the Red Cross/the Red Crescent and its principles (how far can one be neutral, impartial, etc?).

Some six months after the training courses, feedback from the participants is still enthusiastic and positive. Practical projects have been devised and will receive the support of the ICRC. All the participants requested that the ICRC should organise other meetings in 2002. It also appears that this type of activity provides some sort of moral support to Red Crescent volunteers and employees in their work. The participants in the course held in Osh were the first to be monitored in the field. The ICRC delegates met participants in their local branches to discuss the course, review certain points, see what could be used and how further dialogue and joint transfrontier projects and exchanges between local branches might be promoted through Red Crescent projects and work. Training is also continuing so as to enable participants to take on responsibilities in the event of conflicts. A new training course organised by the ICRC should be held in March 2002.

If, for reasons of time, context or funding or for any other reason, the course comes to an end now after this highly positive experience, which lasted but a few days, I can only hope that some new seeds have been sown and that they will result in new and greater mutual understanding.

Postscript - Some Thoughts at the End of October

I left Central Asia thinking that the region knows some serious problems but could develop positively. It was like leaving some nice people from a faraway region that hardly anyone can locate. The organisers of those courses could never have imagined today's situation which followed the events of 11 September. Almost nobody I met before or after my experience in Central Asia knew where were those countries (or what was their situation) that the media put in the headlines today. Some participants were from Termez on the southern border of Uzbekistan where American troops arrived at the beginning of October, some Tadjik were controlling the transport of humanitarian food to Afghanistan. What is happening in the heads of those young

people today? I can imagine that our beautiful ideas have probably been swept away or put to the back of peoples' minds. I wish that the terror attacks would stop. But I would also like all our politicians to listen more to civil society and citizens' opinions, to think about the short and long-term consequences before bombing civilians who have already been suffering for a long time.

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References:

You can visit the web site of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) at: www.icrc.org/

With regard to issues concerning identity – whose complexity we are not always aware of – culture, religion and nationality, I have just read “Les Identités Meurtrières” by the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. Almost every page of the book reminded me of the people I met during my stay in Central Asia. The book has been translated into many languages.



Seminar in Osh. The group at the Suleiman mountain.

