2. Learning to be aware of culture or learning to increase participation?

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Introduction

Opinion polls conducted by the European Commission show a tendency towards intolerance in European societies (Thalhammer et al., 2001)[1] and scholars agree that racism has not disappeared, though the term racist has become a term of abuse, and only a minority of a given population would admit to being racist (Gullestad, 2002). Though racism has not died, I do suggest as many others (for example Stolcke, 1995; Baumann, 1997; Miles, 1993), that it has taken new forms. It no longer finds its ideology in a theory of races, but rather in theories of cultures and nations. However, culture and diversity are at the same time concepts which are drawn upon in the name of humanism to try to overcome the concept of race. In fact, Lentin (2004) describes how much post-war anti-racist work has been constructed around the assumption that racism is a problem of ignorant individuals and that it can be overcome by education. In this anti-racist work it was furthermore assumed that culture could be used as an alternative to race to describe differences between groups.

In this essay I argue that this is exemplified by the educational approach that both the EU and the Council of Europe support by publishing training material and financing international seminars. These institutions claim to fight intolerance through intercultural learning. Much of this work is founded on the assumption that intolerance is based on stereotypes about "the others", and that these stereotypes can be fought by letting people from different cultures come in contact with each other during international gatherings and become aware of their cultural differences through intercultural learning. I suggest that there is a paradox in the way that the concepts of culture and diversity are on the one hand drawn upon as a means for inclusion and on the other hand believed to play a part in processes of exclusion. This paradox arises, as it will be shown, due to the construction of culture as an essence not much different from race in a way that hides the role of history and the state in the marginalisation of certain population groups (Lentin, 2004).

This essay will explore the educational practice around anti-racist work carried out as part of intercultural learning in European institutions. I will first discuss the concept of culture in such intercultural learning, and compare this to the concept of culture involved in processes of exclusion in the general public. Secondly, I will

discuss the concept of learning in this approach. I will do this by challenging the assumption that education of an individual in order to change his or her attitudes is a sufficient and adequate response to intolerance and discrimination. Finally, I will outline some recommendations towards rethinking the role of educational approaches in combating intolerance.

The use of culture, the discourse of "the other"

Lentin (2004) describes a shift in the concept of culture after the Second World War – particularly in UNESCO's response to fascist ideologies – to a sense that could describe differences between groups appropriately without implying the innate hierarchy of theories of race. Through the history of the social sciences there have been many definitions of culture. Previously many of them implied an essentialised concept of culture, where culture was assumed to be some kind of pattern or structure, that each person was socialised into and after that carried around and behaved according to. A consequence of this understanding is that humans are divided into different groups in which all members share the same culture. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and Miles (1993) describe how this understanding of culture is connected to place; ethnic groups belong to a certain territory and citizens of a nation share the same culture. Baumann (1999) adds that culture comes to represent a timeless, unchangeable entity floating in homogenous groups without being able to explain development, as it is simply passed on through tradition. Culture therefore also points towards a distant past, and in the case of refugees and immigrants towards a past in a different place. This culture is an almost unchangeable structure that determines their acts – and which is different from the so-called culture of other groups.

Lentin (2004) argues further that this understanding of culture did not manage to get rid of the hierarchical organisation with some groups above others. This has to be seen in connection with modernisation theory. Titley (2005) describes how post-war Western modernisation theorists viewed progress as a development from tradition to modernity. Culture was seen as a characteristic of "traditional societies", whereas modern societies had "overcome their traditional/cultural beliefs" and were instead guided by innovation and rationality. Culture was in this perspective a form of obstacle to modernisation, which had to be overcome. Even though race has been replaced with culture, the hierarchy between unrelated groups – the traditional and the modern – is still implicit, and the logic of these theories therefore strikingly similar.

At this stage, most competent social scientists have rejected this understanding of culture. During the last few decades they have instead turned their focus towards relations, processes, fluidity and agency (Gullestad, 1998). Barth (1989) proposes "streams of cultural traditions" to emphasise the complex co-existence and mutual influence of different traditions and groups. Baumann (1999) advocates an idea of "cross-cutting cleavages", focusing on the multi-faceted identities of individuals, which are either used by the individual or ascribed to the individual by the surrounding society, to obtain different rights or resources and to negotiate a position in society. There is focus on how people construct the social reality by the way they talk about things and act accordingly. Humans engage in the constant social construction of reality, because they try to make sense out of what is going on around them; they try to understand the connectedness between

flows of events and to control their own role in them (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Bruner, 1986).

Foucault (1982) argues that the social constructions act as a kind of "truth" about the world, about what is right and wrong, and about who has the right to which privileges. This truth is institutionalised through legal structures and organisational procedures, and thus constitutes real power in society. According to Giddens (1996) social science plays a key role in this social construction of reality; as theories diffuse they occupy key discursive spaces in society and contribute to wider social frameworks and social truths. This at least partly explains what has happened with the concept of culture, where past theories on culture as an essence have been acknowledged by the general public as the truth about culture while at the same time being rejected within social science itself (Wikan, 2002; Staunæs, 1998).

In focusing on an analysis of educational practices in non-formal learning in youth work, I will discuss to what extent this essentialised and hierarchical understanding of culture has diffused into the practice of intercultural learning, and give some examples of the public discourse of exclusion that it might be reinforcing.

Ethnic minorities as "survivors from the past"

An example of an intercultural learning exercise – often used at European youth training programmes – is the exercise of "The Derdians" from the *T-kit on Intercultural Learning* (Martinelli et al., 2000). In this exercise half of an educational group play the role of engineers, who have to teach the other half – people from Derdia – how to build a bridge. The engineers are instructed in the criteria for the bridge, and that they have to teach the Derdians how to build bridges. The "culture" of the engineers is not specified – they have science and knowledge, which they can use to teach something to the other group. The Derdians on the other hand do have a "culture". The engineers are instructed in this "cultural behaviour" with such characteristics as kissing on shoulders, hugging, saying yes when they mean no, clear gender division prescribed from tradition and religion, and so forth. The conflict of the simulation turns out to be that the so-called culture of the Derdians complicates the mission of the engineers – namely to bring them knowledge and development. Striking parallels can be drawn between this exercise and the essentialised understandings of culture and tradition inherent in modernisation theory discussed previously.

Intercultural learning exercises are not alone in portraying "others" as survivors from the past. The same tendency can be found in the formal education system. A concrete example comes from an article in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* (2004) where a high-school director is quoted explaining the difficulty of integrating and teaching certain second and third generation immigrants in the school system by ascribing their "dogmatic perspectives" to a feudal system that was left behind in Denmark centuries ago. His proposal is to set a maximum limit for bilingual students allowed at each school, which according to him would relieve the burden on the schools with the most bilingual students. Despite the implications of bilingualism, the director assumes that being bilingual means having "a different culture", and that ultimately the teachers experience the same difficulties as the engineers who try to teach the Derdians how to build bridges.

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Understanding ethnic minorities as tradition-bound leads to different treatment for them than for members of the majority. The Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan (2002) describes how authorities and professionals in Norwegian society now believe that they have to ask the spokespersons of a given culture – often the elderly men – what the correct culture is, as the oldest must have the best knowledge of the roots and the traditions from the past. She gives the example of social authorities accepting the child abuse of girls with ethnic minority backgrounds, and of schools allowing exemptions for such girls from participation in physical education or class-trips that were otherwise obligatory for fear of not respecting their culture. However, not everyone is determined by their cultural roots and traditions. Rather Wikan points out that culture is an othering mechanism, used for those that have crossed "our" national border, and culture therefore becomes a concept for the different, the exotic and often the negative – for the Derdians. It is for instance not common to ask the grandfathers of young Norwegians how their grandchildren ought to behave, so Wikan continues by asking why we consider it appropriate when it comes to ethnic minorities. Wikan claims that by such acts women with ethnic minority backgrounds are deprived of opportunities given to the majority population, and men are given a position of power far beyond what they held in the place they once emigrated from. These are Scandinavian examples of how the "culturally different" are constructed in practice. Education is the main focus for the majority population, whereas preservation of the traditional culture is perceived to be both the aim and the greatest obstacle in dealing with ethnic minorities. The Derdian exercise seems to simply reinforce such constructions.

Ethnic minorities as helpless victims

There are of course other intercultural learning exercises which do not so clearly distinguish between the "modern scientists" and the "traditional exotic people". *The All Equal All Different Education Pack* (Gomes, 1995)[2] has an exercise called "The Refugee", where the participants have to develop a given story about Miriam who arrived in their town two months ago from her country where she feared for her life because of economic circumstances or political beliefs. The participants are guided by questions such as: What difficulties does she face? How is she being supported? What did she leave behind? Another example is from the human rights manual *Compass* (Brander et al., 2003).[3] In the exercise "Take a step forward" each participant gets a role of a person who is more or less advantaged (for example, an unemployed young single mother, the owner of a successful import-export company, an illegal immigrant from Mali). In this role they have to decide whether they will be able to do certain things or not (such as find proper housing, never feel discriminated against). One of the main aims of these exercises is to raise awareness about inequality and problems of immigrants and refugees. So far so good, but why are there no questions about Miriam's resources, or hopes, or contributions? Moreover, the role cards in the exercise that describe disadvantaged ethnic minorities privilege two, as a photo-model and a fast-food maker respectively. But does not cultural diversity bring more than just music, fashion and food?

These exercises seem to reflect a more humanist version of the discourse about "traditional ethnic others", a version which according to Wikan (2002) states that ethnic minorities do indeed lack something due to their cultural differences, a lack that gives "us" the responsibility to help, educate and teach

them the things needed for their participation in society. Grüneberg (1997) calls this the discourse of the helpless victims, and argues that many humanitarian organisations replicate this discourse. Lentin (2004) also discusses "solidarity-type" anti-racism, where the majority may take on a paternalistic attitude towards new immigrants based on their feeling of a duty to help. There is a fine line between an ethics of care and paternalism. The Scandinavian countries are probably good examples of this discourse in practice. Eriksen (1990) argues that there is a widespread pacifying of asylum seekers and refugees in the Scandinavian countries, where processes of care involve taking responsibility away from the persons involved. This is a point that Staunæs (1998) develops. During fieldwork in a Danish asylum centre, she distributed cameras to young asylum seekers. It struck her that the grown-up residents mainly appeared passive in the pictures they took, in contrast to the active professionals. In Stuanæs' attempt to understand the pictures she raises the question of what it means to be categorised as somebody that has to be "worked with" and "helped", somebody who is not participating in but just living in the margins of a society (particularly the case for asylum seekers who are frequently deprived of the right to work or study during their application process).

Relatedly, Preis' (1996) comparative study of Tamil refugees in Denmark and the United Kingdom concludes that the refugees in Denmark are "clientised" by a system that hinders their own initiatives and encourages gratitude to their helpers. Whereas the refugees in the United Kingdom talked about their work, the ones in Denmark talked about their caseworker, and how they were sent from course to course. Preis argues that the group is confronted with caseworkers who expect that it will be difficult for them to access the labour market.[4] In addition, Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2003) describe how caseworkers in the welfare system tend to emphasise personal problems more than personal resources, as it is the problems that justify that measures that can be taken. Preis questions the accuracy of this discourse, especially when it is applied to "immigrants" that have been resident for significant periods of time, or their descendants. Research of this kind and other sources illustrate how the willingness to help and support can easily over time be transformed into a discourse of personal and moral deficiency (Wodak, 1997). A recent example is the evacuation of Danish citizens from Lebanon, which quickly generated widespread media discussion about the possible necessity to check how many dual citizens were committing social fraud by leaving the country while on social benefit. In one newspaper it was stated that, "Immigrants have low employment and a part of them have, in the words of the National Directorate of Labour, a different view on the payment of social benefit" (*Berlingske Tidende,* 2006).

There seems to be a tendency, in at least the Scandinavian societies, towards an essentialised understanding of culture, and a construction of ethnic minorities as determined by their culture and as helpless victims without agency. My reading of widely circulated educational material suggests that intercultural learning and anti-racist exercises may do little to undermine, and may reinforce, this tendency. What should have been a well-meant attempt at fighting prejudices might equally reinforce discursive aspects of exclusion. It might be argued that slight changes in the concrete exercises, or the addition of a few questions might overcome this problem. However, as I will argue in the next section, there are severe limitations in the learning approaches implicit in these exercises.

Learning to be aware of cultural differences and discrimination

A common aspect of many of the educational resources under discussion is the emphasis placed on creating awareness about cultural differences, discrimination, and the need for attitudinal change. An assumption can be inferred from this: a change in behaviour follows almost automatically from a change in awareness and attitude. However, many social psychological studies have shown that the relationship between awareness and attitudes on the one hand and change in behaviour on the other is far from simple, and that other factors play a very important role. Such factors include the general public opinion, concrete competences to act differently, access to needed resources, as well as institutional factors (Stahlberg and Frey, 1996; Manstead, 1996). There are lots of everyday examples underlining this, most obviously the fact that smoking and HIV infection continue after years of awareness-raising initiatives.

Non-formal learning is often drawn upon as an alternative to formal "top-down" learning in school. It is claimed that because it is based on the participants' own experiences while participating in exercises and discussions, it can be transferred meaningfully to other situations. Kolb (1984) is well recognised within educational sciences for his theory of experiential learning. While Kolb's thinking is often cited in non-formal education, there are problems with the way experience is constructed as a means for learning in intercultural education that prevent awareness from being translated into desired action. Simulation exercises, for example, aim at raising awareness about intercultural differences by giving participants instructions that they have to follow (for example, kiss on the shoulders or don't speak). Yet these same rules are exactly the ones creating the difficulties in solving the problem or accomplishing the task of the exercise, thereby creating the experience of conflict. The outcome of the exercise may be that the participants become aware of the problematic aspects of certain behaviours, and the need to behave differently. The participants might thus become aware of the importance of intercultural competences, or of communication during teamwork. However, they did not get a chance to actually practise any of these new skills, as they had to stick to artificial rules that maintained the problem. If learning derives from experience, there is a risk that the participants learn more about what not to do – as that is what they experienced – rather than about what to do. Reflexively, participants may become aware of their own limitations as the cause of intolerance, however, they do not gain the competences needed to actually act differently in their local context.

More importantly, research into learning shows that experience is not a sufficient condition for change, as learning must also be situated in a particular context. Lave and Wenger (1991) have investigated the question of learning transference from one situation to another. They argue that knowledge is not context-free and cannot easily be transferred from the school setting to everyday life. Learning rather arises through participation in "communities of practice", implying a group of people working concretely together on something which gives them identity and meaning, and develops relationally their community and selves as human beings (Wenger, 1998). Learning understood in this way questions the transferability of what is learned by individual participants in a simulated exercise like "The Derdians", in a simulated community of people from different countries and backgrounds, often with no shared challenges and concrete goals for the future in their local communities. The question, then, is whether this setting is not just as remote from real life as the school setting, and thus whether the learning

can be transferred from the simulated community in the individual body and mind back to the real community of practice.

This question of context may be heightened by gathering single representatives from different youth organisations and working with their individual attitudes, as this places intense responsibility on the capacity of this one person to multiply discussions and implement ideas. Even if some learning points can be transferred from the simulated to the actual community of practice, the putative agent of change is likely to meet resistance on their return to an organisation that has not shared the same process. Organisational change often meets resistance if it is experienced as something which is done to you rather than by you, which means that involvement of everyone is crucial for a feeling of ownership of change (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Kanter, 1984). Of course trainers and participants in training programmes are often acutely aware of this, but this awareness does not lead to the competences to instigate and facilitate an inclusive change process. Generally it can be argued that learning stays at the level of awareness among individuals with limited possibilities for transference to a local community of practice.

Behind the discourses on culture and ethnic minorities

In order to rethink educational approaches to addressing intolerance it is of paramount importance to find ways of challenging the discourses on culture and ethnic minorities. While as social constructions they cannot be judged as simply true or false, it is necessary to explore the reasons for talking about these issues and experiences in these certain ways, and the consequences that this entails. An urgent question is who has an interest in portraying ethnic minorities as survivors from the past, and for what reason? What is at stake, for instance, when Danish public debate comfortably regards large parts of the national population as feudal remnants addicted to social welfare, all because of their culture? What kind of powerlessness is inherent in these accounts, and what do those who tell them want to achieve? One obvious answer lies in protectionist visions of European welfare states under siege from outsiders, regardless of the macro-economic changes that have objectively diminished such states. The previously cited EU opinion poll shows that around half of the EU population thinks that immigration increases unemployment and puts a burden on the welfare system (Thalhammer et al., 2001). Given this contradiction, there is not much reason for social elites to challenge the role of culture in explanations of socioeconomic processes. Such a discourse also conveniently obscures discussions of substantive social inequalities, and as Lentin (2004) adds, historically based geographical differences that would otherwise need to be confronted.

Within this wider socio-cultural framework, educational material that reinforces rather than subverts dominant social constructions is unlikely to contribute much to antidiscrimination work, unless it centres on key social inequalities such as access to education, housing, employment and decision making. Youth organisations themselves are invested in the politics of social resources, and training participants may well find that the changes they favour are not widely supported or viewed similarly in their community of practice. All in all we must question whether the best reaction to fear and social injustice in our societies is increased cultural contact through educational approaches that focus on changing the awareness of individuals. I believe not, however educational approaches can

contribute to combating intolerance and discrimination and increase participation in society. However, this necessitates a rethinking of both the process and the desired outcome of such education.

Recommendations for increasing participation through education

As mentioned initially, much intercultural or "anti-racist" work on an international level has been constructed as the challenge of educating individuals and thus fighting prejudices. At the same time this individual approach seems to create limitations. It is first of all a question of whether an individualisation of the problem of discrimination as a matter of awareness and attitudes can effectively lead to action against injustice in local communities of practice, or whether alternatives have to be developed. Secondly, it is a question of whether the individuals involved are in a position to multiply and implement what they learn, and even if they are, whether they will then have the competences to do so through participation-based processes in their organisation or community. I therefore propose that international youth training programmes and seminars shift their focus from raising awareness of individuals in simulated communities towards stimulating learning in real local communities of practice. I propose turning the focus to providing a European dimension to the capacity building and organisational development of youth organisations with the aim of increasing participation and involvement. By this is meant to strengthen the capacity of the organisations to fulfil their role as promoters of equal participation and equal rights through service delivery and by putting demands on the state; in other words to become stronger social actors in the negotiation and distribution of resources and privileges. This has strong parallels to many development programmes aiming to strengthen civil societies, as laid down in policies of several national governments (for example, Danida, 2004). This proposal to turn the focus towards learning and development in communities of practice at the local level gives a new role to international training programmes, namely to develop change agents that can learn from each other at international gatherings and act at local levels.

The first step in an organisational development process could be a participation-based need assessment focusing on where the organisation wants to go, what it wants to achieve in society and what it needs to learn to be able to do so. In this process not only the members of the organisation, but preferably the target group and relevant actors from the community should be involved. It is important not to stop at an awareness of needs and visions articulated in vague virtues like co-operation, sharing of information, inclusion, and so forth, but to continue into a development of competences and improved forms of organising the work. A useful method for this is an organisation-wide inquiry into the best practices on a certain issue, providing the organisation members with rich information about concrete examples of, for instance, co-operation and involvement at its best in this particular context (for further discussions of "appreciative inquiry" see Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). This information can be used as the data for deciding which competences are necessary in the organisation, and should thus be trained. Empowering is not just about being aware of problems, but about being able to make a difference. Relevant examples include setting up procedures for sharing knowledge and making decisions, and developing the competences to facilitate meetings with participation-based decision making. Respecting the location of learning in communities of practice, these competences need to be developed in relation to identified challenges in the local context. Rather than

simulations and exercises from manuals, I propose taking real-life projects and real-life conflicts as cases, and then practise skills in relation to these situations. However, this demands a long-term-process where the participants get time and space to practise the competences, while being coached at regular gatherings.

What I am arguing for is thus to work with actual communities of practice to create a stronger civil society in European societies, where the role of international youth training programmes and seminars could be to develop "change agents" and mentors that share and learn from local actions in different contexts. Such mentors and agents, crucially, can contribute to engaging their communities and organisations by identifying the moments and spaces for challenging dominant discourses and identifying alternatives that point towards different kinds of actions. Secondly the location of learning in communities of practice urges us to rethink the selection of participants for international trainings. In the name of diversity it is a common practice to select individuals from as many different contexts as possible. However, it might be preferable to allow group applications and ensure that there is an organisation-wide commitment to the practice of change management. This would allow participants to reflect on their practice together, create localised responses to their own reality and to support each other in the implementation. Such calls for multiple participants from one organisation is already being practiced by several actors in the field.[5] A lot can be learned from sharing different challenges and best practices in international groups, but it is important to move beyond individualised learning and into stimulating existing communities of practice to strengthen social action at local levels.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. This report concluded that 14% of the total EU population in 2000 could be characterised as actively intolerant. The indicators are, among others, strong negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities, demands for assimilation, more restrictive admission criteria and demands for repatriation. Furthermore the report shows that 52% of EU citizens at that time believed that the quality of education would fall with too many ethnic minorities, 52% believed that minority groups abuse the social welfare system, 51% thought that the presence of minorities increases unemployment and 58% believed that minorities are involved in delinquency to a higher extent than the majority of the population.

2. Published by the Council of Europe.
   Also available at: http://eycb.coe.int/edupack/default.htm

3. Published by the Council of Europe.
   Also available at: http://eycb.coe.int/compass/

4. It is important to mention that Preis (1996) at the same time describes problems in the British model, where the refugees for instance have great difficulties with getting family reunions and entering into long-term education.

5. An example is the Danish Youth Council. They recommended two persons from each organisation to apply for their conflict management training programme starting in July 2006 to facilitate further multiplication in the sending organisations.