

Cultural learning: some issues and horizons

Cultural learning means understanding cultural selfhood as well as otherness. What are the key implications of both, for cultural educators today? What are the obstacles? What can be done?

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The importance of cultural learning was first brought home to me in the mid-1990s, when I was Executive Secretary of the World Commission on Culture and Development.ⁱⁱ The concerns expressed then, from all corners of the world, have been reiterated and modulated in my subsequent engagement with cultural policy, whose interface with educational policy is still, alas, highly underdeveloped. These concerns have led me to envision the stakes of cultural learning, its lacunae as well as the obstacles to it as the discovery of two kinds of complex plurality: i) that of culture itself, of our cultural selves and ii) that of cultural others as well as paths to 'living together' in an interdependent world.

There are no doubt other ways of articulating these stakes: we look forward to debating these as the process for which this short paper was designed gets under way. For example, in the *Catalyst* conference context the emphasis is placed much more, if not exclusively, on the second set of stakes – learning trans-culturally about the cultural dimensions of human difference – whereas I will argue that we cannot understand these without first revising our understanding of cultural selfhood.

Our Creative Diversity was but one of many prescriptive texts that envisage a cultural 'mandate' for educational bodies ranging from schools and universities to agencies in the arena of 'non-formal' education. These prescriptions all recognize the important, often still untapped potential for building better awareness of cultural identity and difference in the teaching, learning and intellectual life of all such agencies, each of

which, as Hilary Callan has put it, are 'theatres of cultural exchange, transformation and self-reflection.' And in the contemporary world, they are of their very nature trans-cultural institutions. This is particularly true of universities, whose ways of being so are very diverse. Yet 'since the transmission of knowledge and understanding necessarily takes place with reference to some wider tradition, any university deserving the name will be a point of convergence for differing cultural strands which will interact, confront, compete or reach accommodation with one another.'

Discovering ourselves

The first obstacle to be overcome is the disconnected, fragmentary, hence inadequate idea of what 'our' cultures actually are. In *Our Creative Diversity*, this lack of meaningful connections between past and present, between the inherited and the invented, was explored in the context of conserving cultural 'heritage' in the delimited sense we use that term today. But even if the Commission's observations did not embrace the entire gamut of cultural values, artifacts and practices that constitutes 'culture'ⁱⁱⁱ its strictures with regard to current practice in the preservation and understanding of the architectural heritage are readily applicable to the predicament of culture as a whole:

This has led to piecemeal work which lacks a correct reading of the remains, the proper identification of their architecture in the stylistic family to which they belong, and a sensitive handling of their setting. All of these are essential to the meaningful connection between preservation and contemporary life. Their application will require curators to have much greater recourse to other professional groups such as architects and masons. They will also require that ...a whole series of competent intermediaries between the state and the "public" lend their competence to the identification and interpretation of the heritage. Such intermediaries would include universities and research institutes able to provide scientific knowledge and an understanding of the significance of the heritage. Religious authorities are important too, for often a historical property is also part

of a living cult and no adequate social support can be mobilized without an awareness of its religious dimension. Without proper understanding of the values and aspirations that drove its makers, an object is torn from its context and our understanding of it is inevitably incomplete. The tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible. This has long been recognized by anthropologists and folklorists and, no doubt, unconsciously by most people. In international discourse and practice, however, the notion of "heritage" has too long been limited to the tangible. (UNESCO Publishing, 1996, pp. 194-94)

There is a lack of 'meaningful connection' not just between the heritage and contemporary life but with respect to cultural understanding in general. This makes it next to impossible to revive for our time the worthy German Enlightenment concept of *Bildung* – the relation between an individual and an objective culture, a world, which has to be transformed and reconstructed in each singular personality. We cannot make sense of our contemporary cultures and where they are going because we do not have the tools to make sense of what they were, of what they have become, and how they have become what they are. This, I would argue, is the principal teaching and learning challenge that faces us at all levels: primary, secondary and higher, as well as beyond, through other intermediary bodies in civil society...

A second challenge, once we have come to grips with 'our' culture, is to understand it in fluid and open, rather than in fixed and essentialized terms. This is vital to cultural learning, if we are to eschew a vision of cultures as bounded and unified systems. Cultures overlap. Basic ideas may, and do, recur in several cultures because cultures have partly common roots, build on similar human experiences and have, in the course of history, often learned and borrowed a great deal from each other. In other words, cultures do not have sharply delineated boundaries. Nor do cultures speak with one voice on religious, ethical, social or political matters and other aspects of people's lives. What the meaning of a particular idea or tradition may be and what conduct it may

enjoin is always subject to interpretation. This applies with particular force to a world in rapid transformation. What a culture actually "says" in a new context will be open to discussion and occasionally to profound disagreement even among its members. Third, cultures do not commonly form homogeneous units.

The challenge is also to question untested assumptions and overturn a number of inadequate ideas. The most overstated among the assumptions is that of *coherence*. This is not to say that cultures lack any coherence or central organizing tendencies whatsoever, but rather that: a) the extent of such overall coherence differs from culture to culture, from historical moment to historical moment; b) coherence is probably greatest in delimited cultural domains connected to specific social practices – hence we should speak of 'coherences' in the plural rather than in any overarching way; and c) coherence of whatever sort does not preclude contradiction or paradox... There is also the problem of locus. Is culture 'inside' the individual? Is it 'outside' instead, in some super-organic structure? The latter is generally taken to be 'society' but the relationships between the individual, culture and society are neither transparent, nor unproblematical...

At least six misleading ideas appear to flow from misunderstanding of the previous two points. First, that culture is homogenous, whereas numerous "cultural" differences may exist along gender, class, religion, language, ethnicity and other fault lines. A homogeneous idea of culture makes a second inadequate idea easier to sustain, namely that culture is a thing. The reification of culture – regarding it as a thing – leads to the notion that 'it' acts and has causality. A perfect contemporary illustration is the 'clash of civilizations' thesis of Samuel Huntington... Reification in turn makes it easy to overlook diversity within cultures, which underpins the third inadequate idea, which is that culture is uniformly distributed among members of a group, leading to cognitive, affective and

behavioral uniformity. Hence the further misconception that an individual possesses but a single culture. He or she is simply British, French, or Czech... Another misconception is that culture is fixed custom or tradition, which necessarily downplays individual agency. And finally, the attribution of timeless qualities to culture, as to, say, the 'European spirit', as seen a unitary cognizing element that has come down to us straight from the ancient Greeks...

A deontology for living together

As regards learning and cultural diversity, the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century chaired by Jacques Delors, also a UNESCO-created entity, set out four pillars as the foundations of educating for the future: learning to know, learning to learn, learning to be and learning to live together. It gave pride of place to *learning to live together*, a process it saw as one that

by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual value and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way (UNESCO Publishing, 1996, p. 138).

The main implication of this agenda is that there can and should be such a thing as 'intercultural education'. This would be somewhat different from the business-driven field of academic research and vocational training, often called either 'intercultural' or 'cross-cultural' communication or, more recently 'intercultural' or cross-cultural' management, although this field has actually given us the notion of 'intercultural competencies' that many of us now commonly use.^{iv} But this field was designed to facilitate negotiation and communication for clearly instrumental purposes. But when goals of a more idealistic order are at stake, intercultural education needs to focus not on *what* people think (content, factual

knowledge) but on *how* they think (the process of arriving at definitions of the good, the true, etc.).

Such education would be 'transformative' because it would lead us all towards a critical stance vis à vis 'our' own respective cultures, on the one hand subjecting our beliefs, values and so on to a more genuinely objective evaluation (and we have already suggested why that is so important) and on the other fostering a willingness to learn from other traditions.

The capacity for critical reflection is particularly important here, for the ability to transcend our own culture and to reflect rationally on its values has to be developed. This can come about in one of two ways: either by recognising the tensions which exist within our own culture or by coming into contact with cultures which have constructed reality differently from ourselves. In both cases we are confronted with ideas or experiences which cannot be fitted into our existing cultural paradigms and the same dynamics come into play. We can either defend what we know and deny the validity of the others. Or we can attempt to put together a new paradigm. Face to face with people from a culture whose norms are different from our own, we can either retreat back into our own familiar norms (ethnocentrism), deny that there are any valid norms for such situations (relativism/nihilism), or develop the kind of intercultural sensitivity which allows us to appreciate the values of the other culture and perhaps to integrate them into our own thought and action.

Towards a practical agenda...

What, one might well ask, are the sorts of concrete measures that tackling these challenges would require? In 2002 I put forward some suggestions in a very specific context: the issue of Euro-Mediterranean intercultural dialogue as tabled by the European Commission, in the shadow of 'September 11'. The emphasis was naturally on the relationship with Europe's

Islamic neighbours on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and at a time when migratory flows oblige all our societies to build a sense of separate as well as shared space for different cultural communities when there is a new kind of dialectical relationship between the 'here' and the 'there', 'inside' and 'outside'. This new dynamic as regards 'the stranger within' remains a key issue for European societies and, I suggest, a template for the kinds of problems we need to be addressing in the somewhat different context of enlargement, where the challenge to our understanding has to do with 'Others' who may appear to have more in common with ourselves.

Hence I will reiterate those suggestions here. The focus in the 'agenda' that follows is on measures that may be implemented within Europe itself, based on the conviction that the European social, cultural and economic space, which already houses people from so many different cultures, can and should serve as a multinational 'laboratory' for intercultural dialogue. Intercultural relations within Europe itself indeed illustrate both the challenges and the possible solutions to them; they can also have a powerful symbolic value; serving as a beacon for further initiatives between Europe and other world regions. Although I categorised my suggestions under three sectors of activity, the first of which was seen as 'the educational', in reality the educational component is just as important in the other two, viz. the social and the informational (Isar, 2002).

A. The educational dimension

- ✓ Encourage and develop critical reasoning in the humanities and the social sciences, with a particular emphasis on teacher training and the revision of curricula and textbooks based on a 'polyphonic' as opposed to a 'homophonic' exploration of the anthropological, cultural, economic, political, religious, scientific and social dimensions of European History in the context of World History.

- ✓ Encourage all possible initiatives within a broad range of educational institutions that promote true knowledge and understanding of cultural variety – in this regard it appears particularly important to locate religious traditions within the broader context of cultural traditions and secure the active participation of people from each cultural tradition to play an active part in the educational effort.
- ✓ Promote public encounters and debates in sites of teaching and learning between students, parents, teachers, and local elected officials with regard to cultural diversity and difference, together with the participation of representatives of different cultural communities.
- ✓ Promote co-operation between university and community networks so as to promote public debate on themes such as democracy, human rights, gender equity, secularism and religious identity and facilitate comparative research on languages and cultures that focuses on emerging hybrid patterns and models.

B. The social dimension

- ✓ Encourage partnerships that focus on civil society actors through framework programmes (*programmes cadres*) that aim at reducing social inequalities, promoting employment and discouraging identitarian closure on the part of immigrant communities, with a special focus on women and young people.
- ✓ Promote facilities for cultural expression on the part of immigrant cultures beyond their own closed circles and seek means to give them voice in contemporary creative movements.
- ✓ Establish meeting platforms (*espaces de rencontre*) in a range of sites which have symbolic significance for different cultural groups and promote intercultural dialogue promoting events that are not dependent on market forces alone.

- ✓ Provide facilities for artistic creation to minority cultural groups that are well-equipped technologically.
- ✓ Promote a range of services based on traditional know-how from non-European cultures in fields such as health care (with regard to infants and the elderly in particular), and the transmission of different forms of cultural expression.

C. The information and communication dimension

- ✓ Encourage the provision of accurate information about all the actors involved in intercultural dialogue, in particular by enabling departments and schools of journalism to develop teaching modules on cultural diversity.
- ✓ Encourage seminars for journalists on leading cultural issues, included contested topics, that explore the sensibilities of different cultural groups.
- ✓ Encourage the discussion of such issues in the media, particularly at the level of local radio and television.
- ✓ Envisage facilities that provide all cultural groups with the communications technology and tools for self-expression.
- ✓ Encourage the preparation and dissemination at local level of information that promotes recognition of cultural diversity and hence of pluralistic values and that also shares the lessons and conclusions resulting from the various dialogue initiatives carried out.

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ⁱⁱ A comment on the World Commission's 1996 report entitled *Our Creative Diversity*, that is very pertinent in the present context was made by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway: 'This seminal report provides a profound understanding of our cultural diversity and its impelling effect on development. It should be read by everybody who wants to understand how we are different and yet why we have a common future.'

References

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ⁱⁱⁱ In using the notion of 'culture' principally as the particular way of life of a human group, I subsume the narrower understanding of culture as the arts and higher learning. Yet in order to avoid the pitfalls of an overly expansive concept I also foreground a vision of culture as what Raymond Williams called 'a realized signifying system', in other words the broad range of institutions, artifacts and practices that make up our symbolic universe.

^{iv} In one recent formulation from the business world these would include: tolerance for ambiguity, behavioral flexibility, goal orientation, sociability and interest in other people, the capacity for empathy, nonjudgementalness and meta-communication skills.