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What do we mean by “Intercultural Learning”?

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What about “intercultural learning”?

The organisation that I represent at this meeting is called “Intercultura” in Italy and EFIL (European Federation for Intercultural Learning) in Europe. In Italy we are the organisation that introduced the term and the concept of “intercultural learning” – almost 40 years ago, when this word was unknown to the majority of my country. Today the term has become very popular: most Italian universities offer courses on intercultural communication, intercultural education, intercultural studies, although this term “intercultural” is used almost exclusively to describe the situation created by the immigration from developing countries.

But the history and the field of interculturalism is a much broader one and I would like to remind briefly how it has developed.

First of all, when we talk about “interculturalism”, we should not forget that the sensitivity for cultural differences is very ancient. Our travellers have always noticed these differences and we have documents that date as far back as the sixth century B.C., when the Greek historian Herodotus travelled to Egypt and to other Mediterranean countries. In more recent times, the diaries of some of our renaissance travellers to Asia, Africa and America are full of interesting intercultural notations. The philosophers of the age of enlightenment developed the concept of tolerance. Other European philosophers, historians and poets of the 18th and 19th centuries described the “volkgeist”, the spirit of nations, in ways that may explain some stereotypes that we have in Europe today. All this means that cultural contrasts, national differences and tolerance have been a part of our vocabulary and of our way of looking at the world for a long time.

The 20th century has added two important dimensions: an impressive development of technology – which made communication very rapid and very easy, through radio, cinema, television, telephone, airplanes and now computers – and the interest for anthropology. These factors and the surge of the United States as a world power, with economic interests and military settlements all over the world, lead to a “boom” of intercultural studies after 1945, at least in that country.

Among the American scholars, in the early sixties Harry Triandis studied **the influence of the environment on people's beliefs and behaviours**, with the purpose of improving communication and understanding across cultures: many of his tools came from cultural anthropology, but his focus was new. In the same years Edward Hall and others explored proxemics, or the **role of space and physical distance** in different cultures. John Condon and Fathy Youssef remarked the difference between **verbal** communication (that usually deals with information: facts, impressions, ideas) and **non-verbal** communication (that usually conveys much stronger messages).

In Europe researchers addressed some of these issues in the context of **peace studies**: how can we create the conditions of a peaceful and constructive dialogue **between** different ideological systems? The centre of these researches were Johan Galtung and his Peace Research Institute in Oslo; with the support of the World Future Studies Federation, they organised summer schools on peace education at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik. Galtung's wife and co-researcher Ingrid Eide was also the author of "Students as links between cultures" (Paris, 1968), with Otto Klineberg, one of the first studies on youth exposed to bi-cultural situations.

Still in Europe, between 1966 and 1968, Geert Hofstede worked at his first international survey on organizational culture, called HERMES. But his major work (that led to the publication of "Culture's Consequences" in 1980) was done between 1973 and 1975 - He tried to measure several cultural variables, such as **individualism vs. collectivism, masculine vs. feminine, power distance and uncertainty avoidance.**

The intercultural research of the Seventies explored **values and value systems**, the concepts of **acculturation, assimilation and adaptation, of ethnocentrism**, and of **cultural relativism. Prejudices and stereotypes** had been studied before by classical psychology, but they were revisited to see how they influence intercultural communication. The concept of **culture shock** was explored from different angles and Ruth Useem drew the curve that describes the cycle of adaptation to another culture.

The author that probably contributed mostly to the explanation of the intercultural theories to the general public was Edward Hall, who wrote a series of best-sellers: from "The silent language" to "Beyond culture" - where he introduced concepts such as: **high context and low context cultures, monochronic and polichronic time.**

"Intercultural learning" and the European institutions

How did the public institutions react to these ideas in Western Europe?

The international institutions were quite receptive. The Council of Europe tried to apply an intercultural approach to the training of teachers who had to deal more and more with multi-cultural class-rooms. The European Youth Centre organized a Colloquium on "Youth mobility and education" in 1978 and another on "Cultural literacy and intercultural communication" in 1981. The European Symposium on "Intolerance" (1980) gave this definition of intercultural education: *"a new learning situation, where learners of different cultural backgrounds are helped to see their differences as resources to draw from and to gain a greater awareness of self, rather than as deviations from established norms; one where each culture is explained in the context of other cultures, through a process that stimulates doubts about self, curiosity for others and understanding of the interaction between the two. Such a process should involve the learners intellectually as well as emotionally"* ("Conference on intolerance in Europe", Strasbourg, CEJ/CI (80)14).

Ever since the early Seventies, the European Communities (now Union) included intercultural learning as one aim of its programmes for the international exchanges of young workers, university students, young professionals: Erasmus, Petra, Lingua, Leonardo, Socrates, etc.

UNESCO opened a division for intercultural studies and intercultural learning was defined as the main purpose of international youth exchanges in an international conference on youth mobility, which was held in Rome in 1985.

In fact, from the Eighties on, "Intercultural" has become a popular term, a password for any situation international in character. This term was used in management courses, in development agencies, in educational institutions, in youth organizations: the more the term was used, the more it became something vague and respected, almost like a process that might offer a solution for any conflict situation, even if the causes of a conflict were often social and economic, rather than cultural: like in the case of underdevelopment, migrations and poverty.

I believe that these levels should not be confused.

A pedagogical approach to intercultural encounters

Our organisation is committed to intercultural learning as a pedagogical process. Our method consists in removing secondary school students temporarily from their home and introducing them to a home and a school in another country, where values, ways of life, and patterns of thought are different. This experience enables them to acquire skills, attitudes and knowledge useful throughout their lives, as they attempt to cope sensitively and intelligently with the global world of today and tomorrow.

We have identified four areas of growth and change, that may be acquired through an intercultural experience:

- personal values and skills
- interpersonal relationship-building
- intercultural knowledge and sensitivity
- and global issues-awareness.

Let us look at these four areas one by one.

1. Personal values and skills

As I just said, at the core of this type of intercultural experience is the removal of people from their familiar environment and their placement in a new environment. Why? Because mobility is a privileged form of intercultural learning: it puts the participants in a "minority situation" or "marginal situation" – *minority* or *marginal* in comparison with the culture of the host country – in a situation where emotions and intelligence are equally challenged, as they try to behave in an acceptable fashion in the new environment. They must make judgments and embark on actions in the absence of familiar cues. In such unusual circumstances, participants are confronted repeatedly with crises of varying dimensions. If participants are well prepared in advance and are assured of support and guidance, they are able to turn these crises into opportunities for reassessing their values, stretching their capacities, and practicing new skills. They gain awareness of previously hidden aspects of their personalities and may attain the following learning objectives:

1. To think creatively

2. To think critically
3. To accept more responsibility for themselves
4. To de-emphasize the importance of material things
5. To be more fully aware of themselves

2. Interpersonal relationship-building

If a participant in an intercultural project becomes fully involved in daily living and working arrangements with a variety of people in the new environment, he or she must develop and maintain relationships with others from diverse backgrounds. The interpersonal skills developed in this intercultural context are transferable to many other settings during the participant's lifetime.

1. To deepen a concern for and a sensitivity to others
2. To increase an adaptability to changing social circumstances
3. To value human diversity
4. To enjoy oneself in the company of others

3. Intercultural knowledge and sensitivity

During the course of their immersion in another culture, participants are obviously exposed to many dimensions of that culture. These dimensions range from the simple acquisition of the language and of the necessities of daily life to the complex and subtle distinctions made by their hosts among alternative values, social norms, and patterns of thought. The experience of being involved in so many dimensions of life has the effect of deepening participants' insights into their home culture as well as their knowledge of their host culture. Most people attain these learning objectives:

1. To communicate with others using their ways of expression
2. To increase knowledge of the host country and culture
3. To increase in sensitivity to subtle features of the home
4. To understand the nature of cultural differences
5. To broaden one's skills and concepts

4. Global issues awareness

Living in another environment helps people to recognize that the world is one large community, a global island, in which certain problems are shared by everyone everywhere. They become able to empathize with their hosts' perspective on some of these problems and to appreciate that workable solutions must be culturally sensitive and not merely technologically feasible. Such awareness prepares them to understand the crises facing humankind. Most people on an intercultural exchange attain the following learning objectives:

1. To deepen interest in and concern about world affairs
2. To be aware of worldwide linkages
3. To gain in commitment to the search for solutions to worldwide problems

Several researches were conducted over the past 25 years to validate these assumptions, from Dr. Cornelius Grove's "impact study" in 1985 to the latest research of 2003-2005 by Mitch Hammer and a group of international experts. These researches indicated positive

variations of all the indexes that I have just mentioned. We have also surveyed our former programme participants many times over the years: they tell us that they were able to benefit from their intercultural learning throughout their lives; many of them report that the impact of their experience increased over the years.

Lessons to be shared?

Are there any lessons that can be learnt from these experience and that can be shared with the educational establishment in Europe? I think so and I suggest the following:

- * that interculturalism is not "learning *about others*" - as we often hear people say - but a way of "learning *about oneself through others*". Whatever is "other" from us becomes a mirror where we see our differences reflected; a mirror that puts questions back to us, about our values, our histories and our vision of the world.
- * that cracking ethnocentrism is the main purpose of an intercultural experience; and I use the word "cracking" on purpose, because ethnocentrism is like a nut - where we may find something good inside, that should be preserved;
- * that knowledge and lifestyles are closely interconnected, that minds and emotions cannot be kept apart in an intercultural encounter;
- * that dialogue is the source of any intercultural learning and that we must learn more **about communication, verbal and non verbal**: about languages, symbols, gestures;
- * that social peace and harmony walk on two legs: one is common hopes and the other is common memories. The latter is more difficult to achieve. In Europe and even within each of our countries, culture unites us and divides us at the same time. We share many common memories; but we also recognise that many other memories divide us. If we want to preserve local identities and traditions, we must acknowledge that prejudice, arrogance and hate are also part of that heritage.

Ethics for intercultural learning

Working for effective intercultural learning means

- working for global citizenship
- teaching the practice of solidarity
- increasing our ability to resolve conflicts.
- helping to develop intercultural ethics

These are essential skills for our times. I will take up these points one by one.

1. Working for global citizenship

The Mediterranean ancestors of Europe created the story of the tower of Babel to express the regret and the desire for a unity of humankind that was lost. But the 20th century – we said it before - has brought new technologies, which give us the physical possibility and

the illusion of being in a world that is one again. But are we capable of using this opportunity? Our memories are strong and our local identities are also strong and they separate us from other human communities. On a wall in Florence I have read some graffiti saying: "Globalism kills you". It is a statement that reveals a nostalgia for small homelands, a fear of being un-rooted, a need of belonging: it is something vital and savage, this survival of the souls of nations beyond the silence of larger political entities. And yet new ties and new relationships develop every day across all borders in all fields of human endeavours. The tension grows between local and global, between loyalties to hometown and hopes for the planet, between being a citizen of the world and remaining a Polish farmer as the Polish educationalist Bogdan Suchodolski once said.

2. Teaching the practice of solidarity

Any successful intercultural encounter must aim at building solidarities. We are an NGO and solidarity is an ideal and a practice that we share with many other volunteer movements. One of my university professors wrote in 1991: "School is not enough, political institutions are not enough. Grass-root action is what we need more and more and that's why we should pay more attention to voluntary organizations, as we begin to realize that the Welfare State has not lived up to expectations". Solidarity involves self-education, between volunteers with more experience and others with less; it means cooperation between the different social and ethnic groups of the same country; it also means international solidarity especially with countries in the developing world, because the art of living together successfully on this planet cannot be a privilege of the rich and of the powerful. I believe that NGOs can give a great contribution to intercultural projects that involve not only international institutions, but also national governments.

3. Increasing our ability to resolve conflicts

Years ago, on one of my trips to New York, I was surprised to see how the language had evolved in that country: saying "Merry Christmas" had become politically incorrect; it was better to say "holiday greetings", without being too specific about which "holidays" was meant. I believe that looking for the lowest common denominator between cultures is not a solution and is a dangerous shortcut, which hides conflicts without resolving them. The challenge of conflict resolution and of being concrete promoters of peace education in everyday life is indeed a challenging commitment for anyone who becomes involved in intercultural activities.

4. Helping to develop international ethics

If we work on these practices of conflict resolution, solidarity and dialogue, we give a new meaning and a new vigour to democracy and we prepare a more human order and justice for the generations to come. Our respect for cultural diversities should never fade into an indefinite relativism without hope and vision, but it should acknowledge that there must be a common ethical basis that allows us to live together as decent citizens of our country and of the world. This common ethical basis has been worded by the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe in their charters and in many documents, which are the framework for any intercultural project.

Intercultural learning and education

At this point one should ask a legitimate question: who is in the best position to implement these theories and to use the tools of interculturalism, to improve interethnic relations within a society or international relations in the world?

The answer is straightforward: those who work with youth, in formal and non formal education, at school, in universities, in youth organisations and in cultural associations; those who shape the educational policies of governments, at the local, national and international level.

There is a long list of obstacles to the practice of interculturalism in the documents of UNESCO and of the European institutions: differences in school curricula and school calendars, lack of recognition of courses taken abroad, lack of appropriate information, lack of medical coverage when travelling, lack of family allowances, lack of competent counsellors, etcetera.

But I want to stress that the main obstacles are not logistic and normative. They exist in the minds of many professionals in education: teachers, school heads, youth leaders and trainers. And therefore I suggest that we must work for a change of perspectives and for a conversion of the minds. We must address those people who work with youth at different levels and in different situations (school, sports, free time) and train them to understand that a purely national or local way of looking at ourselves is not compatible with our times any longer. We need to re-examine our deep beliefs, our values and behaviours beyond **tradition and stereotypes: do common human values really exist in the world? if they do, which are they? which values may become common denominators for humankind tomorrow? is absolute loyalty to our nation compatible with international cooperation? is peace compatible with cultural diversity?**

These questions are crucial for all educators today - and educators have a key role to play in creating an environment that develops this kind of competencies. The goal is to create citizens who are *culturally literate*, which means: able to deal with the complexities of domestic and international migrations and the challenges of globalisation in a mature and tolerant way. It is a way of building peace: not peace as the opposite of war, but a guided discovery of one's identity in the only possible way: through confrontation with differences.