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Irritation about Critical Incidents

Lectures on Experiencing Strangeness

1st Lecture

Intercultural Learning is a principle of adult education

Intercultural learning reflects not only on special „target groups“ like „migrants“ and therefore is more than a specific topic of interest. If adult learners are confronted with new meanings, that don't fit into their acquired cognitive system there is to be made a decision between assimilation and accommodation (Piaget). Intercultural learning stresses the need for acquiring a new context of meaning by first accepting the difference.

2nd Lecture

Who is learning?

The „sphere of selfhood“ as an universe of meaning

1. Creation of a „world“: Separation and distinction
2. Selfhood needs strangeness for its constitution
3. Boundary is a „surface of sensitivity“ to get in contact with the „rest of the world“.

The meaning of the contact might be a relationship like:

- (1) spatial contact: inside-outside like skin, personal space, territorial borders, symbolic thresholds etc.
- (2) norms: „normal“ versus - anomalous, ill, bad, mad, criminal, deviant, dissident etc.
- (3) knowledge: the still unknown but in principle knowable
- (4) the unrecognizable or the transcendence of a selfhood
- (5) the uncanny: the strangeness that comes from „the center“ of a selfhood

4. Importance of the boundary for a system of order (for understanding the world)

- (1) to distinct
- (2) to discriminate in a binary sense: inside/outside, dark/lightened, warm/cold
- (3) to limit the horizon of meaning
- (4) to get in contact
- (5) to cross over from one side to the other

5. The foreign and strangeness is a relationship experienced by a sphere of selfhood in the mode of irritation (the possible quality of irritation is discussed in the 4th lecture)
6. The ability of being irritated by new experiences is therefore the basic assumption for intercultural learning.

3rd Lecture

Different levels of selfhood

Spheres of selfhood on different levels produce a multitude of contact-surfaces

1. The different levels

- (1) organism
- (2) psychic system
- (3) personal system (role-expectations)
- (4) family as inter-generation-system
- (5) social group
- (6) organization
- (7) sub-culture (milieu, life-style structures)
- (8) ethnic-group
- (9) „people“/ nation
- (10) culture as forms of „civilisations“

2. The vertical „configurations“ between the levels of selfhood

- Loosely or tighter coupled configurations:
- the question of homogeneity or heterogeneity

- What „universe of meaning“ is the dominant? What sphere is „ruling“ and structuring the other levels?
- Are there different ruling (and conflicting) spheres? Are they distinct to other spheres of contact? - How many different „surfaces of sensitivity“ are bound together in a complex identity?

4th Lecture

Modes of Experiencing Strangeness

Meaning-perspectives in Encountering „Aliens“

(look in the paper: „Experiencing Strangeness“)

1. Foreignness as Sounding Board of the Self

Foreignness thus appears as separated originality. The elementary separation is necessary for the constitution of selfhood - for instance of interior and exterior, proximity and distance, civilization and wilderness, waking and sleeping, human and animal, mind and body. etc. is understood to be a relation of tension on the ground of an essential mutuality.

The „own“ first emerged from stepping out, through a fall from the original undifferentiated wholeness, which now becomes defamiliarized as exterior and background and which thus now serves as contrasting surface to one's own identity. This creates a relationship between dependency and emancipatory movement. Experience of foreignness as insight into the basis of one's own creaturely, psychological, social or cultural existence can express itself in a fascination with one's own sensitive connection with one's origin, but also as a fearful tremor in the face of threatening disintegration of one's identity. Foreign cultures are likely to be regarded as the childhood of our „old civilization“. Like the South Sea islands before, with Tahiti as the metaphor of an earthly Paradise, India in particular became a symbol of the lost human wholeness that Europeans so longingly craved and that was to be recovered only through empathy.

This meaning perspective rests on the premise of a basic comprehensibility of all forms of human expression, to the degree that one finds access to the common anthropological basis. On the basis of existential transcultural experiences the strangeness of another culture, group or personality becomes experiential on the common basis of the universally human.

2. Foreignness as Counter-Image

The experience of foreignness has a substantially different context when it arises in a structure of order that demands unambiguity and inner coherence, and so consequently the exclusion of what

is different, which it sees as „abnormal“ and „alien“. The foreign takes on the character of a negation of the self, in the sense of mutual incompatibility. Thus the foreign becomes excluded which „by its essence“ does not belong to one's own: as a foreign object it is experienced as a „foreign body“, poison or dirt, that threatens the „pure“ integrity of one's own order. Outside this border, however, it fulfills the function of a significant contrast, which, precisely as a counter-image, can strengthen one's own identity. Unaccustomed, unusual, unthinkable - the foreign appears as the general negation of the constantly perceived horizon of normality. This asymmetry in the relationship between interior and exterior shows itself in its overemphasis on the inside, which attempts to achieve as perfect a self-expression as possible.

The more specifically and contrastingly a dual pair of opposites is constellated, the easier it finally is to create a balance in which one's own and the foreign form an equation with interchangeable signs, so to speak. This is not far from the point where the specific counter-image (Gegen-Bild) may turn into a model (Vor-Bild). If progressing processes of exclusion make the „sphere of selfhood“ ever-more „pure“ and „perfect“ there will be a stagnation of its development. Then the „complex“ (Freud) of the repressed and excluded can take the meaning of a positive alternative. The equation reverses its signs. This explains the utopian character of the foreign as the negation of a reduced and one-sidedly solidified self. Structurally however nothing has changed in this system of order: „Utopia is a system, claiming to be another.“

3. Foreignness as Supplement

The relationship between a „sphere of selfhood“ and that what is experienced by it as „foreign“ is in this mode characterized by an interplay of an appropriation of the foreign and of structural self-change. The identity of such an order can thus be understood as a self-regulating growth process driven by the alternation of „assimilation and accomodation“ (Piaget).

For a dynamic structure of order, the foreign takes on the function of external elbow room that aids in discovering structural opportunities to learn and in which unforeseen developments become possible. So here it is not merely a question of expanding the self through as assimilative „filling“ up, but of the discovery of an unexhausted potentiality of a dynamic structure of order: „Become who you are“. The experience of the foreign is therefore mostly reduced to the function of gathering information, which is useful for the further development of one's own.

Thus, pleasurable assimilation also tests internal integration ability, and it is impossible to predict what surprising consequences may be triggered by taking in foreign structures. Expanding systems are confronted with the basis problem, which can never be decided in advance, of whether changing oneself will be an „enrichment“ or will lead to overburdening the system. Where accommodation opens the sphere of selfhood for foreign structures in a way that weakens the internal processing capacity, the contact with strangeness is experienced as self-alienation. The growth orientated third meaning-perspective narrows itself and must seek recourse in the security of the second mode's rigid boundary setting.

4. Foreignness as Complementarity

Despite all the differences, the three modes already discussed had one thing in common. Regardless of whether the „surface of sensitivity“ was conceived as a resonant membrane, a self-reflecting mirror or a variety of contact sites, what was finally decisive was the fixation on an internal standpoint.

This is no longer the case when the meaning perspective refers to phenomena of an interacting, mutually-creating foreignness. This allows a reconstruction much more realistic for today's world: an image of a „polycontextual“ universe, a network of many autonomous perspectives of meaning. In this structure of order, the world is experienced no longer ambivalent but „polyvalent“. The structure refers not to order as a given but to a communicative practice of mutual distinguishing. This kind of an open, dynamic structure will be termed a „complementary order“ or a „mutual foreignness“.

The practical starting point here is the unmistakable experience that the truly alien cannot be understood, even with the best will. In confrontation with ever more numerous complex universes of meaning, the internal ability of real „understanding“ is rapidly overburdened. After a certain point the intelligent response on strange experiences is no longer elastic accommodation, but the recognition of „incomprehensibility“. This in no way signifies a refusal to understand, but the acceptance of a liminal experience in the sense of a meaningful insight about a specific boundary to one's own possibilities of experience.

In many cases intercultural learning therefore can mean understanding how to learn that und what „we“ (as a person, a group or an organization) principally are not able to understand. In this meaning perspective by experiencing strangeness we can observe that und what we are unable to observe. Foreignness renders visible the „ethno-centric blind spot“ of the perceptual ability of our own body, idiosyncrasy of our psychic-system, our personal point of view, our social group, organization, ethnic formation, sub-culture, nation or the universe of common sense in the form of civilization we are a part of. This way to recognize the limits of understanding may lead to new forms of acceptance between men and women, young and old or where ever you draw the distiction line. Being sensible for „differences that make a difference“ (Bateson) may prove more robust than empathizing with the supposed „universal“ foundations of the human.

5th Lecture

The Structure of Intercultural Communication

1. Social communication

Encoding and decoding of „messages“

The cybernetic cycle of sender - message - receiver

2. „Message“ as the „surface of sensitivity“

Irritation as a message

3. Different situational contexts of meaning

4. Situational activation of „surfaces of sensitivity“ during the contact

5. Observation of a „meta-context“: the social definition of the contact-situation

(look on the graphic given by me)

6th Lecture

How to Learn from Critical Incidents

1. Start with yourself: Open awareness to irritation

(1) Irritation and political correctness:

Are we allowed to be irritated by our disgust? Are we allowed to consume exotic strangeness? Who gives allowances?

Intercultural strangeness is the unexpected irritation, not the wellknown foreignness:

You can't control new experiences, but you can disturb them.

(2) Sensibilization for distinctions and mutual differences: don't look for the common.

(3) Awareness of my own multiple universes of meanings:

get in contact with your feelings, dreams and obsessions

(4) work on your own irritations:

first try to describe, not to explain or to justify your irritations

What about a personal „diary of strangeness“?

2. „Putting on stage“ („mis en scene“- „eine kleine Inszenierung“)

Please write down a critical incident you had been confronted with in a situation that might be or actually was a sort of an „intercultural encounter“ between different „universes of meaning“.

Please describe (not explain) as concrete as you can the situation referring to the following points:

(1) actors (persons that are involved actually or symbolically)

(2) definition of the contact situation (from your point of view)

(3) time and space

(4) describe your feeling of strangeness (no explanation or interpretation but words of feeling)

(5) Please give your scene a nice title

3. Reflexive Learning on critical incidents

The following questions might give you some ideas how to work on those personal significant experiences. This learning might focus on one of the levels of selfhood or might question what the most relevant focus is in the case discussed.

(1) What levels of selfhood might be involved on each side?

(2) What seems to be the most dominant „universe of meaning“ structuring the incident?

Might a change of the „system of relevance“ open to new interpretations and strategies of behaviour?

- (3) Is there a change or a developmental process concerning the dominance of an universe of meaning?
- (4) What is possibly the „mode of experiencing strangeness“ on each side?
(the same - different - incompatible ones?)
- (5) How is the contact-situation (as a whole) socially defined and from both sides experienced? Who got the power to define and enforce the his definition of the contact situation definitely?

4. Working „en scene“

- (1) Role-playing with observers under a given objective (f.e.: to find out new ways to handle the situation)
- (2) Psycho-drama: each side is divided in several „voices“, that give the relevances of the envolved „spheres of selfhood“ und their meaning-perspectives
- (3) Cross-over roletaking: taking the perspective of the other person, group, organization etc.
- (4) Training of adaequate behaviour strategies and performances being confronted with unexpected, irritating strangeness.