

## ***Hendrik Otten***

# **Ten Theses on the correlation between European youth encounters, intercultural learning and demands on full and part-time staff in these encounters [1]**

## **Preface**

The following contribution, in the form of ten theses, takes up various aspects of intercultural learning and relates them to each other with regard to encounter situations in youth exchange projects, with regard to qualification requirements of the staff involved and with regard to what and how young people should be taught within the context of intercultural youth work.

These theses are the result of many years of practical work in this field. They are intended as a contribution towards the qualitative development of practical work and to assist a systematic debate on the prerequisites for this.

The main focus is on youth exchange projects as these are the most widespread form of extracurricular intercultural youth work and there is still, both at national and European level, a substantial need for further training for those persons working with young people in this specific extracurricular context, whether as full or part-time educational staff, in an honorary capacity, or as volunteers.

## **Thesis no. 1**

In Europe, including Eastern Europe, there is increasing evidence of a development in social structures that can no longer be interpreted as exclusively "national-cultural", but which bears some of the characteristics of a multicultural society. Even if there has never been, in the narrower sense of the word, only one definitive culture in a society, the manifestations of social daily life in which culture is expressed have changed to some extent in that attributes of culture and society are undergoing gradual but constant change. Sometimes we experience these attributes as contradictory, such as when they express themselves in types of action and behaviour resulting from different customs, religious practices and worldview.

Culture always presents itself in forms of interaction with interactive partners; culture is not something static, prescribed and stipulated once and for all, rather it is a dynamic process that is subjected to the most varied of influences. Despite this principle of changeability, it cannot, however, be concluded that the relationships between "majority culture" and "minority culture" in Europe are now of a positive nature within the context of equivalence, or that understanding for the behaviour of different cultures has become greater.

## **Thesis no. 2**

A greater number of possibilities - in objective terms - for contact between people from different cultures does not automatically lead to improved mutual understanding. Observations of everyday life provide more evidence of dissociated juxtaposition - in favourable cases - or, more frequently, corroborate the impression that many people feel unable to cope with or even threatened by the presence of persons with customs and habits rooted in other cultures.

Political lobbies are playing on these tendencies more and more, either in the form of demands for more or less unconditional adjustment or in the sense of racist isolation and exclusion, to name but two common positions. The problem is usually defined at the wrong level: culture can never be

threatened, as some people like to contend, rather individuals can sense threats in their physical circumstances and suspect dangers - but can also see opportunities resulting from co-existing with something that is "foreign". The problem is thus located at the level of everyday life.

I conclude from this that intercultural learning should start with our own everyday life before young people experience intercultural encounters in another country as it is otherwise very unlikely that long-term changes in behaviour can be expected.

Criticism must therefore be levelled at the fact that pre-school and school education has, in specific terms, so far responded only in isolated cases to the multiculturalism that already exists to a considerable extent and that the vast majority of children and young people in Europe are still brought up to think more in a "national-cultural" manner.

Intercultural education has, in the same way as any other type of education, a twofold meaning. To quote Alexander MITSCHERLICH in this context: "Education must provide practice for integrating into society while also immunising against it where it wants to force people to follow stereotypes of thought and action instead of critical insight" [2]. Sheer rejection of other cultures' ways of thinking and behaving without examining them objectively represents such a stereotype and this is the basis of political ideologies. International youth work must also reflect this correlation if the claim of wanting to contribute towards the long-term safeguarding of peace is not to be just an empty phrase.

### **Thesis no. 3**

A large number of politicians and educationalists see in the greater mobility of young people - e.g. through more travelling abroad - an essential opportunity for changing attitudes and behaviour vis-à-vis other cultures. Although it is not disputed that travelling abroad provides such opportunities in principle, this thesis does cast doubt on the positive result frequently assumed. Social-science studies on the change of attitudes through tourism show very clearly that most tourist visits abroad do not result in any long-term changes in attitude but, on the contrary, frequently lead to existing negative prejudices being strengthened as the only perceptive habits available for interpreting the stimuli of other cultures are the same selective ones that already distort the image of society in one's "home" surroundings.

This comes full circle with thesis no. 2 which calls for intercultural learning in our own everyday life as a prerequisite for extending our means of perception and behaviour under different conditions. Even so-called alternative travel is often confined to locally exploiting different cultural behaviour experienced as positive - although back in our own normal day-to-day environment curiosity and sensitivity towards being different are very quickly forgotten.

Travel as an important means of self-awareness, of getting to know one's homeland and the world at large, as a contribution to international understanding - here the desire is still much greater than the reality.

"Cultural proximity" alone is not sufficient, either in everyday life or during a stay abroad, to create understanding for being different or even changing ethnocentric perception: those who are open, inquisitive and tolerant will gain relevant new experience while those who are not see their original attitudes as having been confirmed.

International youth work as a possibility for initiating intercultural learning processes requires specific educational policy objectives and adequate conditions for their realisation, otherwise all that will remain will be the hope of success by chance.

## **Thesis no. 4**

Exchange schemes involving young people from different countries are regarded as an educationally meaningful alternative to mere tourist activities. Their contribution to long-lasting reconciliation and maintaining peace is stated as being an essential aim in many state-supported programmes.

It is beyond doubt that direct contact between young people from different countries provides a good opportunity to learn something about each other and experience things together. In this context, many people allow themselves to be guided by the idea of spending a great amount of energy on finding differences that should be learned about. Although this is certainly helpful in relation to intercultural learning, it is in no way sufficient. The difference itself makes no sense; only examining systems of differences and similarities and understanding them as possibilities for responding to social situations will make it possible to recognise and comprehend them.

This thesis therefore proceeds from the point of view that certain factors have to exist if the contact possibilities of an international encounter situation are to be made use of systematically in the sense of long-lasting effects for the individual's own everyday life.

If these factors are not present, it is extremely likely that youth encounters will remain at a superficial level in the sense of situational harmony - the amount of effective learning will be minimal. I will take up this point again in connection with thesis no. 6.

## **Thesis no. 5**

Removing prejudices is one of the things called for most in the context of international youth work. One result of this is that many people hasten to assure that they do not have any prejudices. Where we discover other people have some, we take pleasure in reproaching them.

International youth work must set new emphases with regard to the problem of "prejudices". In particular, it must contribute towards moving away from moralising lectures: "there are no people without prejudices and when somebody claims not to have any prejudices, this contention is no doubt the biggest prejudice" (John DEWEY) [3]. We must learn to accept that we will never know everything and will therefore always have prejudices in the sense of preliminary judgements and that we even need these to a certain extent in order to achieve environmental stabilisation and behavioural confidence. They are, to a certain degree, necessary in "psycho-economic" terms (ALLPORT) [4] for establishing one's own identity through dissociating oneself from others.

This is not, however, a plea for people to come to terms with their prejudices. When encountering other people, even those from one's own cultural group, such prejudices are liable to possible change. Whether and to what extent negative prejudice can, for example, be turned into "more objective" judgements also depends on the conditions under which the encounters take place.

Added to this is the fact that individuals must acquire particular qualifications if intercultural learning within the context of international youth encounters is to provide substantial opportunities. We must study our own perception habits, stereotyped patterns of interpretation and schematic rules of interaction.

We must, above all, become aware of the significance of selective perception: if we have a prejudice regarding a certain type of behaviour, we will, initially, observe only this behaviour again and again. The problem for intercultural education lies in the fact that it is almost impossible to remove such prejudices through purely rational argument, rather they need to be reappraised in new specific situations, i.e. changing negative prejudices through new experience reflected in a different cultural

context.

Although international youth encounters can also have intercultural learning effects without intended and planned intercultural learning experience, these will tend to be of a chance nature, incomplete and extremely inadequate to the general objectives set out.

## **Thesis no. 6**

Intercultural learning is the collective term for the conscious pedagogical planning and realisation of European youth encounters (the major part of international youth work in quantitative terms) which endeavour to prepare the individual in an appropriate and positive manner for the living and working conditions prevailing in a multicultural society.

Democratic political involvement and tolerance as the principle of interhuman action are two distinguishing features for positively defined multicultural social structures.

The following points are designed to serve as clarification:

Firstly the term "culture": what does it mean within the context of European multicultural societies, what does culture mean in relation to European youth encounters as a possible learning environment?

There are countless different definitions of what culture is. What most of the definitions have in common is an emphasis on particular patterns of behaviour, the existence of specific symbols which we learn to apply and interpret in order to communicate what we understand by reality, as well as the existence of specific traditional ideas and associated values.

Besides being an "historical product" of our behaviour, culture also comprises a dynamic potential in the sense that cultural systems not only influence social developments but can also be changed by them. Culture is thus a defining characteristic for learning processes within the context of international youth work.

Specific to intercultural learning, this means not only abstract theoretical learning about the cultural background of others but, in particular, learning from specific social situations in which other thinking patterns and ways of behaviour, the reasons for which may be cultural and traditional, can be made clear and available.

BREITENBACH characterised these learning processes in 1979 to the effect that the typical distinguishing feature for intercultural learning does not comprise special learning mechanisms but, rather, special content and appropriately adequate methods which are perceived as "different cultural stimuli" in a different cultural context and motivate the learner by virtue of their subjective significance ... for him or her to look into the different cultural situation" [5].

To put it in "pedagogical" terms: the content of intercultural learning always includes, irrespective of other subject matter, the behavioural patterns stemming from individual national traditions, whereby young people have to examine the problems arising from the clashing of such different types of behaviour in specific encounter situations and reflect on these with regard to underlying culture-specific habits of thinking and perception.

It is therefore not enough to just know something about other cultures (though this is also essential), rather it is also necessary to directly apply and try out this knowledge within the context of intercultural learning. This is the opportunity for targeted international youth work with regard to dealing with different types of culture-specific behaviour as the ability to incorporate information and

knowledge into one's interaction with others is also required in young people's normal everyday situations - provided the thesis of developing multicultural social structures is shared.

## **Thesis no. 7**

The two-fold significance of learning developed in thesis 6 - as examples in the encounter situation, in the long term in one's own everyday life - leads to a further aspect, i.e. the "how" of intercultural learning. Social learning processes are required because the ability to interact and the capacity to act can only be learnt and acquired together with others. The objective of European youth encounters should be to further these qualifications.

The most concise synopsis of the learning stages regarding the ability to interact and the capacity to act is, in my opinion, still offered by IBEN, which is why I now quote it here in brief:

"a. Getting to know oneself, one's own abilities, possibilities, desires and goals, assessing one's own social position.

b. Awareness of one's own situation in life through recognizing dependencies, interests and causes, as well as through precise observation and analysis of one's environment.

c. Developing communication skills, verbalising feelings and interests, experience and observations, furthering one's understanding of symbols vis-à-vis the verbal and non-verbal signal systems, insight into the real conditions of communication forms and ability at the meta-communication level.

d. Increasing one's ability to interact and capacity to act through developing ego strength, frustration tolerance, resistance, creativity and curiosity, self-reflection and reduced egocentricity, removing prejudices and promoting empathy, role flexibility, ability to co-operate and act in solidarity, awareness of rules and coping rationally with conflict situations, learning ... interaction patterns as well as action strategies" [6].

Now, it would be entirely wrong to take such a list as a "catalogue of learning objectives" and "see it through" as fully as possible. Apart from the fact that this would be far too much for any international short-term educational encounter scheme, some of these qualification features are more important than others in the intercultural context.

This thesis assumes that the ability to interact and capacity to act are central elements of intercultural learning since they allow practical references in a twofold respect, in that they are related both to the everyday social practices of the young people taking part ("intracultural learning") as well as to experience in different cultural situations ("intercultural learning"). Thus, these terms should not be understood as merely practical rational objectives, rather they represent, at the same time, communicative skills and should be understood only in terms of an ensemble of rational, emotional and pragmatic learning aspects.

## **Thesis no. 8**

In the past, international youth work has frequently been concerned with young people who are motivated to a certain extent and also understand that exchange and encounter situations are not a one-off situation. The "classic" target group of those taking part in work-camps, for example, needs to be mentioned just as much in this context as those involved in European youth organisations or who even hold functional positions, including honorary ones. Many exchange schemes within the context of town-twinning arrangements also reveal a cross-section of "experienced exchange workers".

More recent initiatives, including those of the European Union in particular - e.g. the *Youth for Europe* programme and the *European Voluntary Service*-, are aimed expressly at "those unfamiliar with exchanges", i.e. their intention is to reach young people who have so far been involved to only a very small extent or not at all for socio-economic, educational or regional reasons.

Eliminating regional inequalities, which normally go hand in hand with other forms of discrimination, means greater consideration of areas which have, up to now, hardly had their own adequate infrastructure for international youth work and have, for whatever reasons, been neglected in the exchange programmes carried out so far.

If we look at rural regions in Spain, Portugal and Greece, for example, it can be assumed that we will be dealing with large numbers of young people in the future who have never been outside their immediate home surroundings.

This phenomenon even continues to occur repeatedly within the context of German-French encounters, for instance, although this is the largest and longest exchange agreement within the European Union.

If we also accept that at least one of the political intentions of most support programmes is to include initiatives coming from young people, i.e. to involve them directly in all phases of an exchange project to a greater extent, the justified question may then arise as to how the present objectives and pedagogical ideals are to be realised.

Or to put it differently: Is such a concept not itself unrealistic?

To turn the question into a positive one and show that it certainly is the practical situation that is meant when we speak of the ability to interact and capacity to act as being central elements of intercultural learning, three more concepts must be introduced into the discussion which, as basic qualifications, are a prerequisite for this purpose, i.e. role distance, empathy and ambiguity tolerance.

## **Thesis no. 9**

Encounter and exchange schemes consist of interaction situations. Each interaction - as an action-related communicative act - is regulated above all by role relationships. In our everyday practical lives, we no longer question the adopting of these roles, it is something we have internalised and we act accordingly. The more complex this role adoption is, the more secure we feel in our actions; we believe we are behaving in an appropriate manner.

All too often, we fail to consider in this context that we are not concerned with a role-adoption process that has been completed at some time, rather that roles also exist in varying consistency and concrete terms and are subject to the possibility of change.

This understanding of roles is significant for intercultural learning insofar as interaction in bi-cultural and multicultural situations is characterised precisely by the comparatively strong need to change roles or even "exhaust the role" [7].

Young people must therefore try out and learn "new roles" for themselves, which means examining other roles previously unknown to them. In order to take on new roles and be able to accept others, role distance is necessary. This describes the individual ability to "take a step back from oneself", i.e. to look at one's own views, behaviour patterns etc. against the background of national sociocultural norms. This is important because, if these are not seen in relative terms, different cultural stimuli will not be absorbed as positive learning stimuli, rather they will result more in a strengthening of existing

prejudice structures. Role distance is therefore a prerequisite for intercultural learning.

The process of establishing common ground and convergence consists essentially in mutual empathy, in anticipating the (presumed) interpretation by the other person and, following an examination of one's own possibilities, in adjusting to this. This process of establishing common ground is not always free of conflict by virtue of the fact that the young people coming together are from differing sociocultural backgrounds and have different interests. The ability to tolerate different interests, expectations and needs and make allowances for them in the process of establishing an understanding is known as ambiguity tolerance. Development of this also provides information with regard to what extent the fact can be tolerated that one's own view does not always "go down well". This is something that is particularly required of participants in European youth encounters by virtue of them finding themselves in new, different cultural situations.

The associated behavioural uncertainty that initially exists is frequently the reason for competing stereotypes being used and for giving rise to the inability to bring in one's own problems or try to cope with those of others. In positive cases, ambiguity tolerance lives from creating awareness of and gradually being able to overcome this situation.

In turn, awareness of the situation is, as a "meta-communicative" element, the decisive one in our context of intercultural learning: how else is a situation of common significance to emerge if the awareness of it is different?

New understanding of an old role or one that is still unfamiliar presupposes the ability to place oneself in new situations.

Without empathy, which is what this ability is, perception remains confined to one's own respective cultural context, interaction in solidarity with partners from other cultures is made more difficult, and one's own normal everyday practices are not reflected upon. Without empathy, nothing new can develop.

European youth-exchange situations are new situations that require a common interpretation of what is understood to be the reality and meaning of this situation.

As necessary as these basic qualifications in social action are in the context of intercultural learning and thus for international youth-work projects, they must not lead to the neglecting of an important medium for interaction in European youth exchange schemes, i.e. language. This is of exceptional importance for intercultural learning: a lack of knowledge of other languages is one of the main communication barriers in international youth work.

However, intercultural learning achievements do not depend exclusively on a knowledge of foreign languages; situational and group-dynamic factors are also crucial. Media work also plays an outstanding role in this regard by facilitating a wide variety of aesthetic and emotionally meaningful communication even where verbal articulation weaknesses exist. Here, the focus of intercultural learning is on the aspect of experience.

A knowledge of foreign languages is of no great benefit from an intercultural point of view if the young people cannot gather any new experience. For this reason, language is an important planning element of intercultural learning but not an exclusive one.

## Thesis no. 10

This contribution would be incomplete - in the sense of immanent logic, not in the sense of covering all conceivable questions in their entirety - if a number of conclusions were not drawn with regard to the initial and further training of staff involved in international youth work.

It should first be remembered that the objectives of intercultural learning have to be differentiated and modified depending on the group of persons participating, the specific encounter situation concerned and the emphasis of the content, but, I am convinced, without abandoning the intrinsic features of intercultural learning described.

These also apply, in particular, to educational workers in international youth work: these persons must themselves learn what is required in that area, they must themselves gather experience in the intercultural context, and they must learn how these objectives can be realised in exchange projects in general terms.

Initial and further-training programmes must therefore cover

- preparation
- organisation
- execution
- evaluation

of exchange and encounter programmes within the context of international youth work.

This means initial and further-training programmes that:

- provide knowledge on organisational and administrative aspects
- provide knowledge on aspects of the respective youth-policy situation of the countries potentially participating
- offer situations for exchanging one's own experience and information
- provide a forum for developing and reflecting on pedagogical objectives
- provide knowledge on animation methods suitable for achieving these objectives by applying these methods
- provide knowledge on various evaluation possibilities based on one's own practical reflections.

Initial and further-training programmes should therefore:

- comprise a targeted exchange of experience and information
- facilitate new and structured learning experience
- contain theoretical and practical elements, whereby the reciprocal relationship should be quite clear.

I am convinced that the overall objective of any initial or further-training programme must be intercultural learning - as a principle for the learning processes in these programmes themselves and as the general objective of international youth work.

In view of the restrictions of extra-curricular short-term education under which international youth work is predominantly carried out, I consider, with regard to the running of youth encounters, three domains to be priority learning areas for intercultural learning processes, i.e. perception structures, social attitudes and the resulting types of behaviour.

To clarify the correlation between these areas, attitudes are to be understood as elements that regulate behaviour. Social attitudes are directed towards a positive or negative behavioural willingness - with the intention of finding direction in one's everyday life.

For interaction situations in the intercultural context, role distance, empathy and ambiguity tolerance have to be added as the different cultural situations require new and previously unfamiliar interpretations - orientation in the encounter situation, guided by the respective individual attitude structures.

Social attitudes possess a cognitive component - in the sense of a picture that allows perception, knowledge, opinions, etc. to take effect -, an emotional component, which accompanies the picture in a positive or negative way, and a behaviourally relevant component that triggers behaviour.

International youth work that plans and legitimises its encounter situations and prepares its staff in this spirit has, I am convinced, a very good chance of contributing towards long-lasting peace and understanding in everyday life - not only during an international youth encounter but, above all, in our own respective multicultural societies.

Hendrik Otten 1997

### **Annotations:**

[1] An initial version of the theses has appeared in: H. Oberste-Lehn, W. Wende, Hrsg., Handbuch Internationale Jugendarbeit. Interkulturelles Lernen, Düsseldorf 1990. The present version is a revision from 1995/97 and based on the version that already appeared in English and French: Jeunesse pour l'Europe. Guide de formation. La formation interculturelle pour plus de qualité dans les échanges de jeunes. Bureau d'Echanges de Jeunes de la Communauté Européenne pour la Commission des Communautés Européennes. Brussels 1992.

[2] A. Mitscherlich, Die dialektische Funktion, die Erziehung erfüllen sollte. In: H. Haase, Hrsg., Alexander Mitscherlich, Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. III; Sozialpsychologie I. Frankfurt 1983, p. 33.

[3] Quoted from R. Bergler, Vorurteile und Stereotypen. In: A. Heigl-Evers, Hrsg., Sozialpsychologie, Vol.1: Die Erforschung der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen. Weinheim - Basel 1984, p. 238.

[4] Developed in: G.W. Allport, Die Natur des Vorurteils. Köln 1971.

[5] D. Breitenbach, Interkulturelles Lernen und Internationale Verständigung in der internationalen Jugendarbeit: eine theoretische Einführung. In: Ders., Hrsg., Kommunikationsbarrieren in der internationalen Jugendarbeit. Vol. 1. Saarbrücken - Fort Lauderdale 1979, p. 13.

[6] G. Iben, Sozialerziehung. Soziales Lernen. In: Ch. Wulff, Hrsg., Wörterbuch der Erziehung. München 1974, p. 539.

[7] For details, see H. Otten, Zur politischen Didaktik interkulturellen Lernens. Opladen 1985, p. 47 ff.

