

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Lynne Parmenter

Principal Lecturer in International
Education

Faculty of Education

Manchester Metropolitan University

l.parmenter@mmu.ac.uk

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

“The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters is a tool designed to encourage people to think about and learn from intercultural encounters that have made a strong impression or had a long-lasting effect on them. In discovering what underlies these encounters users become more aware of their experience and their reactions, thereby developing their intercultural competences.”

Council of Europe

<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/>

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

- ▣ It is especially useful to use in conjunction with school trips or as preparation for and during study abroad.
- ▣ It can serve as a reflective learning journal.
- ▣ It can be used as a stimulus to introduce complex concepts of culture and intercultural learning.

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Focus of attention in analysing encounters is based on Byram's (1997) model of savoirs:

- ▣ Attitudes and feelings
- ▣ Behaviour
- ▣ Knowledge and skills
- ▣ Action

Theory – acknowledgment of identities

This is the ability to properly observe and take notice of other people's identities, and to recognise their identities, rather than making assumptions based on instant observations.

Age, sex, clothes, skin colour, accent, behaviour etc.

Sometimes accurate, sometimes not!

Theory – Tolerance for ambiguity

The ability to accept that you may not understand the situation, and that ways of behaving and thinking may be different. People with low tolerance for ambiguity may find intercultural encounters quite threatening. People with high tolerance for ambiguity tend to find such situations exciting and stimulating.

Theory – Respect for otherness

Respect for otherness involves openness and curiosity, and a willingness to suspend belief, and accept that other ways of doing and thinking are just as normal to other people as “our” ways of thinking and doing are to “us”. It does not necessarily involve agreeing with the other, but it does involve recognition that their view has just as much validity as yours.

Theory - empathy

- ▣ Empathy is key to intercultural competence. Being able to decentre and see things from a different perspective is essential. Decentring involves a process of seeing one's self from a different perspective, and putting oneself into the mind of a different person. Very commonly encouraged at primary school (especially in history), but becomes less common as children get older.

Theory – communicative awareness

- ▣ Recognition of different verbal and non-verbal rules of communication, e.g. eye contact. Recognition of the effect this has on communication, and ability to negotiate communication so that it is interculturally appropriate and successful.

Theory - knowledge

- ▣ General knowledge, e.g. of social processes, historical and contemporary global trends, cultural theory, language and communication
- ▣ Group-specific knowledge, e.g. language, culture and society, systems and politics, religion of a specific group
- ▣ Person-specific knowledge, e.g. of the role, status, personality and purpose of the interlocutor

Theory – Knowledge discovery

- ▣ The ability to identify what is still unknown, and to acquire new knowledge about a culture through a variety of means, especially the ability to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs and values in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Theory – Interpreting and relating

- ▣ The ability to compare situations, behaviours etc. in two or more cultures, and to explain another culture to members of one's own culture, and vice versa. This can be at a very simple or complex level, and is an essential skill to avoid the trap of claiming that a culture can never be understood by outsiders because of its “uniqueness”.

Theory – critical cultural awareness

- ▣ Critical awareness of one's own and others' beliefs, values and behaviours, and of the ways these influence views of self and others. This awareness is necessary to avoid the risk of blind relativism, and is the basis of action.

Theory – action orientation

- ▣ Willingness to go beyond knowledge, skills and reflection, and to actually use these as a basis for action which contributes to the common good. This is where intercultural learning links most closely with citizenship education.

Discussion

- ▣ How do you currently develop intercultural competence in the classroom?

Discussion

- ▣ Which of the theory elements form part of your teaching of culture in the classroom?
- ▣ Which would you like to introduce? Why? How?
- ▣ Which would be difficult to incorporate into your teaching? Why?