Are there collectively held values in learning which are recognised in , and shared by, several cultures while remaining respectful of cultural distinctiveness ?

Corina Suteu[1]

In a book published in 2000[2], the French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin is underlining the need to produce a context for new humanistic studies, based on two complementary and antagonistic pillars: the integrated study of sciences and of humanities .
Indeed , the existing educational systems are generally separating the two aspects of human knowledge and creating, consequently, a form of partial understanding between those whose approach is related to human sciences and those whose approach is more scientific. This grows to be one of the reasons of serious divorce within the academic circles between the two families of thinking and , what is even more negative, a reason for mutual ignorance and despise. How often have we heard a scientist regarding with indulgence the knowledge endeavours of humanist thinking and how often, too, human sciences and technical sciences departments within the same university are just 'tolerating 'each other!
These are reasons why Morin strongly puts forward the need to educate and develop in the individuals a sense of so called 'general intelligence', not a disciplinary focused one(like in the traditional existing education systems) and argues that empowering people to think the globality, the complexity and the multidimensional character of the present world will enable them to evolve even better in specialised and specific competency fields, but from an integrated perspective**.**

We should teach, says Morin, both about the 'oceans of uncertainty' and the 'archipelagos of certitude', in order to prepare the individual to the radical changes the modern world is subject to; last but not least, he is advocating an 'antropho-ethics', as final objective of learning methodologies, so that learning processes give way to a responsible and ethical planetary conscience of each educated individual .

Getting in touch with Morin's inspiring ideas drives us to question, indeed, the very notion of collectively held values in learning today . Is learning about what we are told we should think or about what we build ourselves, through experience, in a present world more and more synergetic and connective and less and less based on axiomatic legacies. Are schools supposed today to transfer a culture , or should they better encourage learning processes that facilitate an open approach to the multiplicity of cultures (cultures of being and cultures of doing).
To find some possible answers, let us look into a couple of ways of approaching these issues :

Relativism and the necessary irreducibility of individual values

In his very controversial book, 'The closing of the American mind[3]', Allan Bloom is showing , already in 1987, that the balance between the need to accept the relativism of any absolute truth and the need for a solid and irreducible infrastructure of values that you believe in is the key source of an accomplished personality. He is putting forward his fear that the aggressive abolishment of strict borders , in the name of democratic behaviour, between high and low, good and evil, right and wrong produces, in the long term, not only the guarantee of an egalitarian society and democratic one , but a dangerous dissolution of any individual belief and of any individual irreducibility, so necessary to the building of the self. More easily can be an educated

---

person , ready to accept the co-existence of many truths and the necessity to tolerate them all because he is told so, become a victim of processes, not an actor of them, than someone whose values are strongly focused, less subtle, but also less fluid and submissive to the aleatory movements of the environment.

Blooms book has been accused of nationalistic and extremist tendencies, and rightly so, but the questioning he arises are of actuality, as far as today 'the strong ones', those who impose their rules seem to be the ones that promote radical values, not relative ones.

How can one build inside the learning systems the ways in which accepting the others and having an open attitude to the difference is not synonymous with being ashamed of having ones own, strongly affirmed beliefs, even when these beliefs are not commonly accepted?!

Education systems should maybe concentrate more to give a long term answer to this question. We can see a very good example of this when we look into what happened with education systems on former communist countries . The generations educated inside the authoritarian regimes are strongly marked by the ideological stamp of it. However, they are also the bearers of present transformations in those societies and the fact that a dominant ideology had vertebrated their beliefs and articulated their values offers a strong determination in middle aged generations to break through and set up different values of the new societies that are in the process of being built. This determination is less evident in the young generations (never touched by ideological syndromes) of the same countries. The new educational systems set up inside the so called 'emergent democracies' did not succeed to formulate a real pedagogy of democratic values, therefore the citizens are weakly armed to defend and express what they believe in. Paraphrasing the title of on of the British Council's brochures for its 70th anniversary, these generations do not know "what they would dye for". And this is at the least a worrying situation.

Creativity as empowerment

Going now to a second example , Ken Robinson is publishing in 2000 a report under the title "All our Cultures/ All our Futures"[4]. Author is insisting about the modern challenges that education is facing today; they are: the economic challenge, the technological challenge, the social challenge the personal challenge; all these challenges respond to a need to empower people who have to deal with the changing of the global landscape.

Robinson assumes that 'cultural education ' and 'creative education' can provide the requested empowerment, offering the means necessary to amend people's capacities to deal with development, change and diversity.

Creative processes encourage, Robinson says, both freedom and control, team building and individual self building. In the creative process, the individual is producing his own learning cycle and builds, together with the others, a mutual knowledge, a new common culture.

Yet, culture and creativity are today not very much present in the curriculum at any level of traditional education systems; hence, their systematic introduction could be of critical importance to a renewal of the approach to the over rational aspects of education and training. .

We can even notice that in most European countries Arts Schools and Universities are not regarded as being of equivalent academic levels and the legitimacy of art school credentials is regarded with disdain by the 'real' university circles . Or, it is maybe in Arts schools all over Europe that the new sensitivities are expressing themselves in a much more reactive and synergetic way to 'global ' trends that in the well established academies.

The renewed balance that creativity can produce between the self and the objective world, between the innovative aspect of an artistic work and its material relevance and objective acceptance by the others, could offer a good sample of unity in diversity, so necessary to the new social logic of ' patch work –like' societies we live in .

---

[4] UK national campaign for the arts, Robinson K., 2000

Educating in the age of 'transcultural diversities'

Last , but not least, the ideas developed by Taylor related to what he calls 'embedded statism'(1996) show how much our ontological basis of social research and policy is grounded in the very idea of the nation state; Or, cultures are today transnational, the homogeneity of cultural existence within a state is outdated, there is only heterogeneity![5]

Educating the individual for societies that are no longer in search of a normalising cultural pattern, but on the contrary, in search of a model that offers the conditions necessary for the coexistence of diversities, is a need to be addressed .

From this point of view, a paradox deserves to be mentioned. Primary and secondary schools in all former eastern European countries are teaching European history and literature from a much more Universally oriented point of view that they do in France or Great Britain.

A pupil in Poland will learn in a balanced way about cultural achievements of Poland, Russia, Germany, France and Great Britain, while a pupil in France will no nothing about Polish or Finnish culture. The result is that a good Polish pupil will be culturally ready to open himself to a bigger variety of European sensitivities and will be better prepared and empowered to deal with diversity and 'live ' it . The never-ending astonishment about Eastern Europeans speaking more foreign languages that French and British, for example, has its raison d'être also in the way that pupils in those countries were brought to regard each of the European cultures as part of an integrated pattern, not see one of them as dominant .

We see here why transcultural values should become primordial an also we see how they clash with outdated patterns of the established nation state educational mentalities.

How to get out of this circle and reshape a cooperation logic of the educational cycles , acknowledging present processes and evolutions and offering to diversity a real learning opportunity is a critical challenge.

Some final points

Relativism of absolute truths accompanied by irreducibility of beliefs, creativity as an active learning tool and emergence of transitional patterns of education cycles design themselves today as maybe the key instruments in the building of a dynamic system of knowledge that could provide the individuals with both a 'global' and 'ethical intelligence' Edgar Morin is speaking about. These could be the basis for commonly accepted cultural dynamics which are no longer turned exclusively to past national achievements , but mostly to present and future common global social building. In order to reshape education systems in the sense of a reconsidered set of values, norms and modalities it is indeed important that reflexion takes place not only through the traditional education communities at all levels, but it has to encompass artistic and technological communities, cultural producers and scientists, as well as other active stakeholders of knowledge provision. We might even say that in the context of the present world, we should maybe stop wanting to build and recognise a ' common cultures' , based on the idea of shared dominant values, but learn to accept and to deal with the connective aspects of the present realties and transfer this to teaching methodologies.

Of course, these assumptions can be only the starting point for further reflections , not the end of them, because, as Kalil Gibran, I believe that "the vision of one man cannot lend its wings to the understanding of another".

---

[5] Robins, K, 'Transcultural diversity', Cultural policy and cultural diversity, 2004, CoE