

Intercultural dialogue

“In my experience intercultural dialogue takes place at the local, national and international level through engagement between individuals or groups from two or more cultures. It usually results deliberately or unwittingly in the improvement of understanding, provides increase learning and is sometimes a curser to relationship building.

Perhaps I should consider defining the two elements of ‘intercultural’ and ‘dialogue’ separately. Taking the latter first, as it is fairly uncontroversial to define dialogue as the connectivity between the ways in which relationships are transmitted and can be quite technical in its execution...though most of us at some time have got touchy at the method and processes used. The ‘intercultural’ on the other hand often demands synergy and sensitivities between groups of different race, political, religious, aesthetics, cultural values and mentalities with a shared or common interest. When both elements are placed together ‘intercultural dialogue’, the third element of respect and equality becomes a necessary ingredient.

My first deliberate entry to intercultural and international dialogue by today’s definition was uncomplicated; its single aim was to provide an opportunity for young Black Britons to reconnect with their cultural homeland in order to renew their sense of identity. From this simple act, I had learnt how to give without knowingly receiving. I, like others worked tirelessly carrying sand and bricks to and from its drying place on the beach to the village where the school was being built until the palms of my hands were raw, skin stripped from the friction of hard labour.

All communication was, however, conducted in English and looking back, the visiting international voices, even that of a young 14 year old seemed to have been more loudly sounded than that of the villager elders, even on basic things like the rota for cooking, cleaning or what we should eat and how the campers should spend available free time at weekends. Incidentally, there was no friction or decent as everyone accepted this and the villagers were almost euphoric with appreciation of the time and resources that came with the international visitors, after all they were getting a school room in which to shelter and educate their children. However, this could be construed as passive acceptance in the ‘power of identification’, ‘the spoils of the finder’, displayed by the international visitors.

I have since observed many local intercultural dialogues in action for example the proliferation of multiethnic celebrations and immersion days in secondary schools across the country is fundamentally about building intercultural understanding through creative dialogue. Most of us will know of situations across the UK where intercultural understanding is the main currency in obtaining community cohesion.

My random thoughts on the subject turn to the Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber – founder of the Kibuts movement in Israel, who said “relationship between people and god and people and people are ‘I and thou’ relationships of maximum respect, but relationships between people and objects are ‘I and it’, showing power and authority”. This implies that the type and quality of our dialogue is dependant on the language and purpose for engaging. Furthermore, that being clear about the need for and type of encounter at the outset is important. Being clear about our intention could mean we are better undertook across different cultural mentalities. Using the ‘I and its’ approach where appropriate as a means of sourcing a cultural product would then be clear and accentable by all as one sunnier meeting the demand of others

Almost everyone who is involved in or speaks on the subject of intercultural dialogue will immediately announce the need for respect and tolerance. However, the question remains, if all our actions are informed by respect and tolerance as the minimum threshold for constructive exchange, where on the continuum would we place understanding and appreciation of others cultural aesthetics for our intercultural dialogue to flourish?

The route into any dialogue (intercultural or otherwise) is usually shaped by the individual spirit followed by the purpose for the engagement and the expected outcome.

Swirling in my head are a range of views on the nature of the dialogue; some being culturally and politically exploitative, while others have served to positively enhance cultural understanding, which have created lasting synergy between peoples of very different worlds. Yet even at this point I am still unable to give a clear and definitive personal assertion on intercultural dialogue to my satisfaction ...but then I came across Robert Cooper who says, "In the end, it has to do with our concept of man. It is not just what people want that matters, it is what serves human dignity."

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