

The organised cultural encounter

Translated from Danish by John Irons

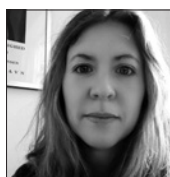
Upper secondary students go on exchanges abroad so as to become global citizens. Danes with a Muslim and Christian background take part in joint events to get to know each other better. Integration employees are sent on courses to learn how to deal with refugees. These – at first glance – different activities all seek to build bridges across cultural differences via a particular organisation or framework. In this article we argue in favour of analysing such activities as ‘organised cultural encounters’ and assessing them in relation to the practices that are enacted, rather than in relation to the success criteria arrived at by the activities themselves. The concept of organised cultural encounters covers activities that have been organised with, as their starting point, differences that are conceived as influencing the creation of identity, in particular ethnicity, religion and nationality. The aim of such events is to bring about change. This can be change in the form of better integration, greater tolerance and



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coexistence, or the development of the ability to function in a pluralist and global society. Seen as such, the event is also borne forward by the idea that there is a lack of the same. In other words, there is a need to change or develop people – the participants, in the first instance.

Based on three cases, we illustrate in the following how an analysis of cultural encounters as events both focuses on the potential for change that is established, and the participants' action and counter-action in creating the cultural encounter.

The interactive field between repetition and recreation

Kirsten Hastrup (2004) describes culture as flexible communities and emphasises in relation to cultural encounters (here not specified as 'organised') that on the one hand they have been framed in advance, but that this framework cannot, on the other hand, be described as a plot that is followed by those taking part in the encounter:

A cultural encounter is a comprehensive dialogue between persons or groups who initially view themselves as culturally distinct. But here too people are true to character in relation to each other, in relation to a particular conception of the plot which is perhaps constructed for the occasion
(Hastrup 2004, 182)

In extension of this perception, Mike Baynham sees cultural identities as being both 'brought about' and 'brought along' to a given context (Baynham 2015). The latter points to the fact that every identity has a history which is linked to particular cultural contexts. Whereas the former dimension (brought about) indicates the creative force that is linked to cultural encounters.

It is precisely the creative force or creativity that is Kirsten Hastrup's main focus, since she opposes the widespread conceptions of culture as homogeneous and static and conceptions of people as bearers of this stable cultural luggage. Control and power relations are not absent, but retire into the background, because Hastrup places creativity in the foreground. Mary Louise Pratt (1991), on the other hand, coordinates power relations and creativity in her concept of the contact zone which is developed in order to understand cultural encounters, especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Contact zones arise where people meet in social contexts, where the power differences are present both to structure and control the relations. The non-dominant party in the power relation can thus not avoid

relating to the understanding and ordering by the dominant party of the social and cultural reality.

Here we can approach the concept of organised cultural encounters – for we are dealing with special attempts to intervene in some of the processes that take place in the contact zone. Paradoxically enough, this occurs by advancing contact as the means that can overcome the unpredictability of the contact zone. When contact becomes a means in this way in the organised cultural encounter, it is because the creative or transformative aspect of the contact is stressed. Thus the specific framework for the encounter is not only determined by the general cultural understandings that are in circulation but also via the particular organising carried out by the organisers. In the interaction between these two things the ‘plot’ arises (see the Hastrup quotation above). The organisers attempt via their ‘plot’ to handle or minimise the unpredictability that is linked to contact zones, and this inevitably involves a reduction of the complexity that typifies everyday contact zones. That this is inevitable is extremely important, and something to which we will return in the following.

The organised cultural encounter typically starts out from specific differences that are to be overcome or understood. In two of the following three cases it is primarily national-cultural differences that are the centre of interest (Rysensteen Gymnasium and the courses for integration employees), but in the third instance it is religious differences (the religious dialogue encounter at Christiansborg, i.e. the Danish Parliament). This focus on proposing differences – proposing and thereby emphasising a difference is a premise for the events themselves and at the same time is one of the ways in which the complexity is reduced.

Cultural understanding and cultural exchange at Rysensteen Gymnasium

Student exchanges and study trips are part of formal and personal education at most upper secondary schools (Tranekjær et al. 2015). At Rysensteen Gymnasium, these exchanges have a special nature and positioning in the form of home stays among students from partner schools abroad which use the Global Citizenship Program as their starting point.¹ The students work during all three years on a particular destination country (which can be located in America, Europe, Asia or Africa) that is thematised in various subjects, and with which students are exchanged. There is a pronounced understanding among the teachers that the transformation in the direction of inter-

cultural competence is to be promoted via a challenging encounter with ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ rather than with that which is well-known and taken for granted. So here there is a reduction of the complexity of both ‘the well-known’ and ‘the other’.

The examples in the following are to show how the cultural encounter is organised via cultural understanding teaching (and the thematisation of the destination country in the rest of the teaching, e.g. Danish and Religion) that precedes the reception by the students of those from abroad and their own trip to the destination country. The teaching in cultural understanding is the point of departure for the evaluation of the students’ learning gain and development in the direction of world citizenship. During the teaching sequence, the students learn about the difference between a traditional and a complex understanding of culture, and their ability is strengthened to adopt a nuanced and reflective attitude towards culture and the forthcoming cultural encounter. The plot in relation to their home stays is thus a critical, reflective approach to culture, where culture is to be understood as something that cannot be demarcated or limited by the national, and where the meeting with the other involves a meeting with oneself. In the assignments that are part of the teaching sequence, by virtue of their very formulation and the students’ answers, a shift takes place towards a more simple and static concept of culture. This can, for example, be seen in the following assignment formulation given the students prior to their receiving students from Egypt:

The product is an assignment where you analyse your experience in order to understand Egyptian culture, your own culture and the actual cultural encounter, as well as some good advice about how one ought to enter into a cultural encounter for future students – and for yourselves when you come to Egypt.

This framing of the cultural encounter is subsequently reflected in the student’s assignment answers, as can be seen from the following examples, first from some participant observations made by students who have been visited by Egyptian students in Denmark:

Throughout the week we spent together with the Egyptian exchange class it was clear that we come from two very different cultures, where different sets of values predominate and from societies that are very differently organised.

Here a cultural unambiguity and homogeneity are advanced, where the ‘cultural self’ is directly opposed to ‘the culturally other’. It is not

always, however, that national-cultural differences tend to freeze. Another group of students had India as its destination country, and here much of the preparation had to do with the teaching of religion, as it was religion in particular that turned out to be divisive. Religion was however also included in the national-cultural framework 'India' (which, as is known, is characterised by religious diversity and conflict). This framing is clearly seen in the students' essays:

[...] I showed great interest because I've never been that close to a polytheistic religion before. But because of my Christian faith I could follow their line of thought and understand why they believed in those things [...] The gods of their polytheistic faith had their distinct personalities that described aspects of the God of my monotheistic belief, and some of them even describe what we call the Devil.

As can be seen, it is not exclusively differences that are singled out but also similarities. This, however, does not change the fact that the actual point of departure for the comparison is grounded in religious differences. The extracts from the assignment formulations and essays raise the question of the extent to which the learning potential that actually lies in the teaching of culture and in cultural travel is possibly challenged and limited by the national-cultural plot that is established in the preparation for the encounter with 'the other'. At the same time, it is also important to point out that even though the students' reflections display a high level of reduction, they also reveal – as the quotation makes clear – a perceptive and cognitive potential. There are both reflections on the complexity, grey zones and multiplicity of meanings, although these are overshadowed by the focus on generalisations and stereotypes. This can be seen as a result of the students' need to handle a complex reality, but it can also be seen as a result of the extrapolating of a 'plot' which precisely tones down the complexity of the cultural encounter.

Religious dialogue at Christiansborg

One of the aims of religious dialogue can be to counteract conflict and radicalisation and to promote mutual understanding (cf. Galal 2015)². One form of dialogue is where religious leaders meet in their role of representatives for their respective religious group in order to talk about a common issue (Hansen 2009, 21). In May 2016, such an event was held in Fællessalen (a big meeting room) at Christiansborg under the title 'Interfaith Dialogue Confronting Extremism'. The

meeting had been organised by Danish-Arab Interfaith Dialogue and the Danish mission company Danmission. Among the invited speakers were religious leaders, inter-religious activists, civic society activists, politicians and a single researcher (LPG). Those in the audience were a mixed group of Christians and Muslims, academics and practitioners. The main theme was introduced by Karen Klint, a Social Democrat and formal hostess, and in her opening speech she pointed out that religion can both be part of the problem and part of the solution. This accentuation of religion was further underlined by the fact that the majority of the speakers in the self-presentation embodied distinctions between Christians and Muslims. The speakers, for example, wore such clothes as turbans or scarves which signalled not only a Muslim but a particular Muslim affiliation, while a number of the clergymen present wore visible cross round their necks. The emphasising of the difference seems, paradoxically enough, to be a prerequisite for facilitating the movement towards being able to meet on common ground. This common ground was a universal humanity, but was also the creation of a common history or a common religious narrative, as was the case in Dr. Al-Sammak's speech. He emphasised how Jesus and Mary play a central role in Islam and thereby implied that Christians and Muslims are not all that different. A number of speakers also underlined the role of religion as an advocate of peace as opposed to the misuse of religion by extremists. The emphasising of the religious differences at the same time toned down national, ethnic and political differences that might possibly be conceived as having an influence on the development of extremism. Although the Bishop of Copenhagen adopted a cautious criticism of the present political situation as regards minorities in Denmark and Europe, it was not the political or national contexts that in general were dealt with. This was even clearer in the speeches by the Arab representatives, where not only the national contexts but also the difference from Christianity disappeared. Instead, it turned into a dialogue about where Islam should be heading with various types of difference theses as markers (tradition contra modernity, salafism contra a more genuine Islam, religion contra spirituality). There was clearly mutual disagreement concerning the transformation of Islam that ought to take place, but as an overall narrative the dialogue seemed to confirm the dominant Western conception that it is Islam that ought to change.

These reductions of complexity – both the universalising and those between various types of Islam – meant that the event was able to present a group of leaders who unanimously stressed the possibility for and the necessity of dialogue across religions and thereby also

be able to function as a model for the audience. Just how this dialogue would be able to lead more concretely to less extremism, apart from Muslim heart-searchings, slid with a few exceptions into the background, because a democratic and dialogue-oriented approach occupied the foreground in complete accordance with the location where the event took place, i.e. the Danish parliament.

Courses in intercultural competence: We Danes are odd

Courses in intercultural competence, cultural understanding or management of diversity are a large, varied market. They can range from individual events to large modules, and those who take part also vary considerably. Furthermore, organisers have different concepts about what must be changed and how that change is to be achieved. Across the board, however, the courses aim to equip participants to handle future encounters with cultural differences. The example in this article is individual course days in intercultural communication for municipal employees who work with integration. Since it is the municipalities themselves that decide who belongs to this category when they send employees on the courses, the body of participants ranges over many categories of professions and positions: education-ists, nurses, social advisers, social workers, etc. The vast majority of the participants in all these categories are women.

The course days have a number of fixed components. Firstly, there are teaching blocks which explain what culture is, and which deal more concretely with cultural encounters between Danes on the one hand and non-Danes on the other. These blocks are interspersed by a number of discussion blocks and exercises. The focus in the teaching blocks is very much on making what is Danish appear odd. As a course instructor, referring to Geert Hofstede's IBM investigations (1991), says: 'Denmark differs for all the parameters – we are actually rather odd; and what happens then when we are to receive others into our little country? We are uncommonly self-satisfied.' Participants in the courses are in this way offered a position as part of this 'us the oddities', who, as was the case with the Rysensteen example, are defined on national-cultural lines. Course participants are thus addressed (and this is presumably deliberate on the part of the organisers) as representatives of the majority; and there are also mostly such participants, but there are also others whose body markers (skin colour in particular) point towards a different background. This establishing of a common 'we' is not surprising, given that the con-

text we are dealing with is an institutional and often authority-wielding one, but the implicit reduction of possibilities for positioning also has (unintentional) consequences. So the course operates in a particularly reflective way: in the foreground are the challenges to reflect on one's own practice, own culture, own position – and challenges to depart from the trodden paths. But via the creation of an (odd) 'we' the point of departure is created for these reflections to be fairly uniform.

This becomes on the one hand visible to me (KHL) as an observer on a few occasions that the ethnic/cultural differences become noticeable in the room both actually and outside the plot; on the other hand, it tends to disappear again. As when one of the participants – a social worker with a Somali/Arab background – says: 'I experience it [i.e. the encounter with non-ethnic Danish citizens] differently. I have a different ethnical background, and citizens expect me to understand them better, and then they are disappointed.'

Here diversity is thematised in relation to the institutional 'we' (= local government), which the course upgrades on the geographical scale to an (odd) national (Danish) 'we'. The participant's statement points to their being special challenges connected to not being an inconspicuous part of this 'we' when meeting citizens. But also to the fact that 'the difference doesn't make any difference', or, perhaps more accurately: must not be allowed to make any difference. One can perhaps also suggest as an interpretation of the statement that the exercising of authority has to do with rules not with understanding. It is an uphill job to teaching in or argue in favour of intercultural competence if it is an institutional understanding participants come with. And this applies irrespective of the framework the course makes use of. One could, however, suggest here that the (odd) Danish 'we' that the course focuses on risks reinforcing the existing understanding of Danishness as a homogeneous entity.

Conclusion

Despite their rather different nature, the three examples illustrate how differences and similarities are emphasised and toned down in particular ways depending on the context and framing of an organised cultural encounter. We have pointed out that the reduction of the existing cultural complexity is inevitable. This does not further imply that the aims of world citizenship, deradicalisation and better integration could be achieved if only 'one became more complex' in one's approach. One is therefore justified in asking if organised cultural encounters can actually attain aims of this nature,

no matter how they are organised. If we restrict ourselves to the immediate goal of transforming participants in a given event, we point out in this article that there is a need for one as an organiser to seek to find out to what extent the organised cultural encounter facilitates or hinders creativity and variation in the positionings possible for the participants. In the cases described, the participants bring along and produce a cultural complexity in relation to gender, race, class, religion, age, profession, etc. which the encounter directs (seeks to direct) in particular ways. These dimensions of difference can, in principle, constitute a potential for the participants' understanding of cultural complexity, but only if there is room for them within the framework of the event. This also because the event and the plot will always be insufficient in being able to predict and include the innate unpredictability that is involved in any cultural encounter.

Notes

1. The case of exchanges at Rysensteen Gymnasium is based on fieldwork carried out in connection with a research cooperation between Louise Tranekjær and Rysensteen Gymnasium (2015-18), financed by the think-tank DEA.
2. Both the case of religious dialogue and that of the training course for integration employees is based on fieldwork carried out in connection with the research project 'The organised cultural encounter', financed by Det Frie Forskningsråd with the grant-ID: DFF-1319-00093.

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