Chapter 11

Education for a Culturally Hybrid World

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ABSTRACT

In an international context of increased heterogeneity, education such as that offered by higher education institutions is very unlikely to help manage the cultural clash and prevent violence. If academic curricula exclusively aim at developing professional competences, the students’ adaptation to societies characterized by frequent cultural commingling and encounter is almost impossible to happen. In the absence of intercultural competence, the conflict between cultures is imminent. In this chapter, we attempt to show that through teaching literature, contemporary fiction in particular, by using the reading grid provided by intercultural communication, it is possible to offer students the knowledge, skills and attitudes that would make them more competent intercultural communicators, willing to acknowledge difference and value diversity.

INTRODUCTION

It becomes more and more obvious that education such as the one that we formally offer nowadays is not suited to the contemporary world. It is enough to consider the events that are affecting, whether we like it or not, all of us – the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks, the 7/7 attacks on the London Underground, successive terrorist attacks in Pakistan, the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo and the November 2015 Paris attacks, the 2016 Nice and Brussels terrorist attacks, the 2017 London and Stockholm attacks, the coup d’état in Turkey, the Exodus or the war in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria.

What is behind all these events that traumatize and scar the contemporary society? What we see is extreme violence in actions that jeopardize the individuals’ integrity and menace the stability and proper functioning of societies. What people feel is exacerbated fear. Societies experience uncertainty and instability.

National and regional governments, as well as international organizations think over solutions to the present day situation. These solutions, however, translated into numberless legislative initiatives, laws on

human rights, on war, education, segregation, discrimination, equality and diversity, are, in most cases, nothing but external interventions meant to regulate systems whose interconnectedness require more than laws. Tolerance and harmonization of views, fostering of attitudes that can bring people together rather than divide them are essential to putting an end to conflicts that affect the world in its entirety.

In the aftermath the World War II, there have been tremendous changes in the world’s geopolitical constitution. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the national and regional frontiers have opened. The space of the world has become essentially frontierless, with clear integrative potential. However, what we come to realize, especially in light of the present day events, is that, although the Berlin Wall fell and the Iron Curtain collapsed, societies are still divided and in a state of conflict. Many more invisible walls divide people and tear societies apart. The opening of the world’s frontiers seems to be drawing to an end. New “Berlin Walls”, of different natures and materials, are being put up. Brexit, the Mexican wall or the Hungarian barbed wire border are just examples.

There is no doubt that, because of all the changes having occurred since the nineteenth century to the present day, societies are no longer the same. Even if there may be a reconfiguring of nation states, of regions or of the world as a whole, we cannot help admitting that the cultural homogeneity of the previous centuries is impossible to recover.

The main characteristic of the contemporary society is heterogeneity and hybridity. Cultural commingling has become a fact of the world. Under the circumstances, people, territorially mobile, are in more frequent contact with one another, but, unfortunately, they are too little prepared for the cultural encounter in the absence of the necessary knowledge and skills that permit adaptation to new environments and, consequently, successful interactions.

The aim of this chapter is to show that physical violence has become an issue mainly because it is strikingly visible and injurious. There are many other facets of violence, less visible, more insidious and thus difficult to prevent, such as stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, or ethnocentrism.

In the academic environment it is not enough to transmit knowledge. It is also necessary to educate such skills that would help people live peacefully, by valuing and accepting diversity without fear. Self and other are perforce in a perpetual mirroring relationship and without proper knowledge of oneself and of the other, as well as intercultural competences it becomes practically impossible to imagine the future of this world.

Drawing on our experience as teacher and educator, we would suggest the possibility of educating the young for a culturally hybrid society by using literature, in particular contemporary fiction.

There are at least two reasons why we consider literature an appropriate means of educating. First, if we start from the assumption that ignorance is associated with fear, we can see literature as one of the best sources of knowledge and understanding, of oneself, the other, and the world in which we live. By building thick descriptions of the other, we are likely to value the other for who they really are rather than inferior to us. Moreover, literature offers the chance to transgress material frontiers and thus integrate cultural spaces. Second, if we accept the idea that “the migrant, the man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age” (Rushdie, 2002, p. 415), and that, to a greater or lesser extent, we are all migrants, we can also use literature as a means of providing the contemporary individual with a “survival kit” in a culturally fluctuating environment.

Being aware of the psychology of the traveller across cultural frontiers, we are more prepared to face the challenges of the cultural encounter and thus refrain from withdrawing behind those invisible walls of our own construction.