



Explorations in intercultural work integrated learning: Educational process for a Topsy-Turvy world

Marcus Bussey^{a,*}, Åse E. Bjurström^b, Miriam Sannum^c

^a University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore DC, Queensland, 4558, Australia

^b University West, Trollhättan, Sweden

^c Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan, Vänersborg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how work integrated learning (WIL) can be re-imagined/re-enacted as collaborative playgrounds of networks. To do this we first establish the working context for these reflections by exploring fragments of biography and the immediate catalyst which was a recent seminar held over 5 days, beginning in the rural Swedish town of Ed and, for the last 2 days, at University West in Trollhättan. We then set out to explore the normative and theoretical context of our approach before finally moving to an exploration of the concept of WIL via CLA and scenarios. Our overall goal is to describe some features of an expanded concept of WIL as it relates to intercultural learning. In doing this we hope to generate processes that facilitate the kind of learning necessary if we are to enable teachers and students to build sustainable futures they can realistically aspire to.

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This paper proposes a creative engagement with a feature of our modern cultural and educational landscape: work integrated learning (WIL). Creativity's role, from a cultural point of view, is to challenge conventions – not least the academic one of written style – in order to offer other possible futures to those engaged in cultural reproduction [1]. We propose to weave our story into the account of an event that pushed the boundaries of WIL and us. Yet we aim to develop an open and reflexive futures context that helps us frame the cultural terrain of WIL in such a way that we and our students are not confined to the linear discourse often adopted in higher education institutions when the funding for such programmes comes up for debate.

So we wish to begin this exploration at the beginning by acknowledging that the work of cultural play has for us been a life long process. To begin at the beginning, as Alice was advised by the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, is a good place to start. However, we will not take the King's advice of going through to the end, as for us who follow the rhizomes of cultural play, there is no end [2,3]. The present is open and the future beckons.

Our purpose is to explore a way of learning that relates to a growing rhizome, learning webs of conviviality/playgrounds for new stories. We do so in relation to an annual seminar on Interculturality and Sustainability at University West, Sweden. The theme for the 2009 seminar was 'Collaborative playgrounds in-between' and it incorporated divergent voices from Tanzania, Bolivia, India, Australia, Uganda and Sweden. As these voices flow together a chorus emerges in which biography, as lines of flight across both space and time, weave together. Two of the authors (Bjurström and Sannum) have shared this play for many years, as the following anecdotes attest, and we find the finger prints, like resonant echoes, to our play together this year in Ed and Trollhättan.

* Corresponding author at: University of the Sunshine Coast, Sustainability Research Centre, Locked Bag 4, Maroochydore DC, Queensland 4558, Australia. Tel.: +61 7 5459 4889; fax: +61 7 5456 5008.

E-mail addresses: MBussey@usc.edu.au, mbussey@ozemail.com.au.

- 1969
 - “Happy Easter”, shouted a strange figure after having torn up the door. Amazed, we got up from the kitchen table just to see the back of a tiny Easter witch (Sannum) who ran away across the fields. On the hall floor was a triangular letter filled with Easter candy. “Run - catch her!” howled Dad. I was stunned. “Why did she not stay enough for thanks?” Dad, originating from the area told us about the Dalsland custom of the Easter letter and the subsequent compulsory Easter witch hunt. Second to seeing a black man in the bakery at Brunnsbo Square, this was the most exotic thing, I (Bjurström) in my then four-year-life had experienced.
 - “But what is This?” we ask, whilst in Pettersson’s henhouse. It was packed from floor to ceiling with the most unlikely things. “Mom bought them at an auction, it’s tights for the circus”, explains Miriam, daughter of a collecting mother with a taste for the odd. “I bet we can sew them together and use them for fishing in the river.”
 - On a gloomy November day, in the ruins of a barn, we move slowly and ponder the traces of activity we see. The ash turns everything grey. We are the last survivors. A pitchfork, a part of a bridle, a wheelbarrow and some wheel nuts are brushed clean, put on high and saved. “Well, what do we do now then?” “How do we survive from here?”
- 2009
 - A seminar entitled “On Interculturality and Sustainability: A collaborative playground in between”, takes place in the same area. The organisers (Bjurström and Sannum), who have temporarily left Petterssońs henhouse, have prepared it mostly by formulating an open, clear and intentional invitation. The invitation is sent out to students, networks, colleagues, companies. The play at Gamla Real in Ed and at University West will soon be staged with people from Tanzania, Uganda, Australia, Bolivia, India, Bohuslän, etc all with a common interest in and commitment to exploring interculturality and sustainability.

Playfulness is infectious. It invites all present to open, in a non-threatening way, to emergence. Institutionally the intercultural seminar is the third of its kind held in Sweden and was arranged by University West, AkHUt (Academy for Sustainable Development) and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan. It is part of a measure at University West with a special focus on how Intercultural WIL can be developed in relation to a flexible network. This tension between meaning making process and structural frame brings energy to the creative encounter in which learning paradigms rub up against one another and the resultant ‘heat’ shapes the between [4], the point of encounter, like hot wax in a crucible.

1. Context: what happened at the seminar

The Intercultural seminar in June 2009 started off with a 3-day session in rural Ed. The theme *A collaborative Playground in between* was investigated in an Open Space [5] manner. The topics varied from a session on *Proverbs to City soil—on growing in cities* to *A silent walk in the forest nearby* to *Footsteps to Sustainable Energy* to *An intercultural Play about ideas of learning to Storytelling—based on a tour around Ed looking for traces of Old and New stories* to *Cooking to Meditative dance* to *Reasons for Optimism to Costume Design*, etc.

The last 2 days of the seminar were held in the urban environment of Trollhättan at University West. The participants were met by Professor Sven-Eric Liedman who, via a prerecorded audio–visual message, told a mysteriously growing number of teddy bears about the importance of play. The fourth day investigated intercultural communication based on various projects that have emerged within the networks and as from previous seminars. In the middle of the seminar doors to a spacious and quite room were opened, a room with its walls covered with empty paper.

In the afternoon we met in this open space in-between and focused on the re-occurring themes that had emerged within the discussions earlier. After a physical warm-up the walls were filled with threads from the discussions, networking ideas, etc. People wrote, drew, doodled, corresponded in an attempt to capture fragments of the process. All was accompanied by music that moved from soft musical improvisation into joyous and energetic kletzmer. Participants danced and wove around the space.

The following ‘word cloud’ (Fig. 1) captures something of this outpouring. It consists of words that were written on the paper that covered the walls in the “inter-space” room at University West during the seminar. The bigger the letters are, the more frequently the word was used. It can be seen as a mirroring of the collective consciousness evolved during the seminar.

As Friday was World Environment Day we discussed world context in relation to different aspects of the Economy and Environment. The wide range of topics included Economy and Ethics; Microvita and the Shaman; Reflections on the banking systems from an aliens perspective; Prout and the Global Economy; and Quality management for global sustainability.

2. From context to reflection

Much had happened between the play of 1969 and 2009. Values and their associated commitments form and are tested in life. Adjustments are made, compromises struck between ideals and reality, and all the time we nurture our dreams. In this playground of life we craft meaning [6]. As educators we come to understand the struggle for control of hearts and minds as a call to our civilizations to wake up and take note. We inhabit an unstable and topsy-turvy world so our mechanisms of culture must change with it. And for this to happen of course, we too must change. The following premises outline our starting point in this creative cultural work.

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