Transcultural Learning: Emphasizing and De-emphasizing Difference as a Pedagogical Task

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Abstract

In general, cultural integration and assimilation are demands made of migrants, to be achieved unconditionally with varying levels of social support. This is, in principle, a high educational aim. At times, some migrants are approvingly recognized for their (educational) achievement. More often than not, it is denied them. The concept of transculturalism goes beyond such social expectations, pointing out educational potential that is highly relevant for personality development and societies in transition. In this article we develop, or demarcate, a transcultural notion of education based on a scenario of exile.

The Exile Experience

Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975), a German-born Jew, lived in exile in the US from 1937 onward. Initially published in the US in 1943, the philosophical description of her experiences in exile, "We Refugees," begins with the following political statement: "In the first place, we don't like to be called refugees" (Arendt 1994, 110). She traces the attitude expressed here to the exclusive connotation the refugee's flight has with the consequences of punishment for breaking the law or radical political views. Other triggers of flight, as in the case of the Holocaust, are virtually ignored. She reported that transcending the bias of the majority culture with regard to flight, Jewish exiles were largely under the illusion of free choice and reacted by over-adapting to their adopted country: "Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political and legal status is completely confused" (ibid., 116).

According to the quote, in the process of migrating the cultural script gets lost (Schank & Childres 1984). A cultural script allows individuals to fully meet socio-cultural

expectations in their relations to knowledge and action. It regulates which aims of actions are considered justified and which means of achieving said aims are found appropriate. It specifies which ways of dealing with subjects or feelings and which behavior in certain places, institutions, and toward persons are deemed appropriate, as well as how a social role is interpreted *properly*. As a rule, the largely habitual compliance with a cultural script reinforces one's sense of social belongingness and is thus stabilizing. In exile, such scripts become inaccessible. Arendt wrote: "We lost our home, which means familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings" (1994, 116). She was not writing about a simple specific loss, such as a job for which people could compensate by adapting to the new situation or assimilating. Rather, she described a fundamental loss of self and instability. Arendt adds to her observations: "Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social ties are cut off. Moral standards are much easier kept in the texture of a society" (ibid.). In situations of muddled social ties, moral standards are also lost. It stands to reason, she writes further, that migrants should accept the new situation and assimilate as quickly as possible, adapting themselves to a new cultural script. Yet this would exacerbate social imbalance even more. "And this curious behavior makes matters much worse" (ibid., 116). After all, while striving to meet the extensive demands of adaptation, their own initiative – today we would associate this with agency – and with it, their social engagement, would be used up: "The confusion in which we live is partly our own work. […] Lacking the courage to fight for a change of our social and legal status, we have decided instead […] to try a change of identity" (ibid.). For this reason, Arendt described taking on the presumed identity of choice as "vanishing" (ibid., 114). She viewed attempts at assimilation, even when outwardly perfected, as "[…] the vain attempt to keep the head above water. Behind this front of cheerfulness, they constantly struggle with despair of themselves. Finally, they die of a kind of selfishness" (ibid.).

The last statement, "They die of a kind of selfishness," can be interpreted variously. Couched in psychopathological terms, Heinz Kohut (1971) showed that crisis and trauma could induce a narcissistic personality disorder. Such a disorder entails a lack of empathy, self-overestimation, and heightened yearning for recognition. Kohut also describes narcissistic rage and a lust for power in personal relationships, professional contexts and politics that border on addiction. The condition can lead to violence. In addition to the personal drama, the descriptive scenario of identity loss resulting from

mimicry harbors volatile social and civic dimensions in extreme cases, namely narcissistic disorder.

And the "vanishing" she described also transcends the level of the individual. After all, the agency and social engagement of those who, according to Arendt (1994), use themselves up quickly in the act of cultural integration rest on a society in transition. Recognition of diversity is not only a basic rule of any useful social practice it is also an ethical imperative. One's ethical signature does not only stem from fundamental constitutional rights or the obligations attached to signing the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rather, diversity is constitutive of societies in transition.

Preserving Cultural Identity Amidst Societal Progress

Without outside impetus, it is virtually impossible to gain insight into one's own habitual cultural script. For this reason, natives do not necessarily question their expectation that cultural novices adapt themselves to blindly performed cultural patterns. Today, cultural integration and assimilation are unconditionally demanded of migrants across national borders and sometimes even affirmatively granted (e.g., Pokorny 2016). This puts societal or social pressure on people with migration backgrounds to adapt. Such internationally proclaimed and loudly publicized cultural–indeed, national–scripts largely overshadow the phenomena of transculturalism and its educational potential. The issue intensifies when following Wolfgang Welsch (1995): biological, territorial, historical-traditional, linguistic, moral, and political definitions of social belongingness are suggested in the concept of culture. According to them, steadfast belonging to the majority culture in the sense of habitual innateness would be considered adequate, while other cultural scripts would be deemed foreign and therefore, inadequate. Welsch views such an attitude as old fashioned; after all, "[…] [c]ultures in reality no longer have the assumed form of homogeneity and separateness" (Welsch ibid., 2). Culture must be thought beyond the categories of 'inherent' and 'foreign'" (Welsch ibid., 40). We shall return to this point.

Hannah Arendt (1994) advocated preserving one's old cultural identity even amid societal progress. Instead of striving for assimilation, she emphasized that all exiles represent cultural knowledge: "Refugees, driven from country to country represent their vanguard of their peoples–if they keep their identity" (ibid., 119). She attributes to refugees the special capacity to make their own cultural scripts–which they once followed self-evidently and without reflection–visible and conscious at least in part, thus

contributing to understanding among peoples. For they demonstrate the daily intertwining and meshing of cultures in action beyond national or linguistic borders. And this is the precondition for developing transcultural competencies (Spindler 1974). The culturally confused references to knowledge and action of people in exile are what make educational potential visible–the following section contains a further analysis of this hypothesis. In the process, we will further examine the transcultural approach based on the question of how people's actions are demonstrative of cultural scripts.

The Theory of Social Practices

The theory of social practices makes it possible to study transcultural knowledge as an integral element of practices. The approach differs from established action and decision-making theories as well as normative models ("rational choice" approaches), according to which subjects, given their subjective meanings and personal preferences, behave rationally and with the aim of utility maximization. Instead, in line with Pierre Bourdieu (1987) and Theodore R. Schatzki (2002), we assume that practices themselves engender an individual perspective on a social reality, based on which the actor must behave. They define culture as patterns of knowledge and thought that guide action, which are reproduced in interaction and communications, yet are mutable at the same time. According to this interpretation, cultural practices are "[…] guided by neither norms nor interests (as is 'action') but instead are based on knowledge" (Breidenstein 2006, 17). Cultural knowledge encompasses more than knowledge of culture; it is found in routine behavior, is embodied and inherent in material artifacts (ibid.). This means it can be read in judgments, actions, and objects. Here, everyday life is "[…] considered a bundle of interrelated, interwoven social practices that must be explored in their self-reinforcing tendencies and intrinsic functioning" (Breidenstein 2008, 207). Performative "practical understanding" is the preferred means of analyzing such "bundles" (Reckwitz 2003). "Practical understanding" is the same as "agreeing to understand" (ibid., 289), which is best expressed in the collectivity of behavior patterns. Assuming the applicability of the theory of social practices, transcultural learning and knowledge are not only treated as integral elements of practices, but also as modes of practical understanding.

Why shouldn't people in exile place their agency and social engagement in the operationalization of their transcultural knowledge? That would make their transcultural

knowledge useful to society. In the following section, this basic concept will inform the pedagogical and scientific approaches for and in the name of diversity and plurality.

Practices of Cultural Diversity and Transcultural Knowledge

Cultural diversity emerges in experiences of difference that have been lived through, reproduced, analyzed, and processed. Furthermore, absolutely all judgments and actions not previously specified are based on classifying and experiencing difference. For example, everyone cannot always focus on everything all the time. It is not possible for everyone to represent and practice "ownness" in the same way (see Geier 2011). Classifying and experiencing difference is a characteristic of all societies; society is determined by social belongingness and exclusion. Systems of difference give rise to the self-images and actions of collective and individual actors. The same applies to understanding foreignness. However, judgments, actions, and understanding foreignness are not only oriented toward systems of difference; they modify them as well. References are made to cultural diversity and plurality particularly when understanding is at issue – primarily in the political sense–or the respect and recognition of societal systems of difference.

Knowledge relevant to the majority culture is explicitly, implicitly, and performatively separated from the knowledge that is irrelevant to it (Geier & Mecheril 2017). Irrelevant knowledge is de-emphasized, suppressed, discriminated against, and marginalized, while cultural exclusions widely considered plausible are normalized, made visible, deemed valid, and reproduced. The explicit and implicit reproduction at work in emphasis via schism penetrates all areas of society. The consequence is hegemonic cultural structures. Transcultural knowledge is the mode of reference to hegemonic connections (see e.g., Spindler 1974; Göhlich & Zirfas 2011).

In a society in transition, also termed democracy, hegemonies are always imagined as only temporary. With reference to the illegitimacy of their exclusions, they can also be criticized and even ruptured. This can occur in a planned, controlled manner. Synchronically, however, within the mixture of knowledge applications, it is more often the case that hegemonic shifts occur as the result of a dispute over the respective predominance of a certain body of knowledge. The transcultural knowledge connected to systems of difference and its expression in practices therefore competes with other systems of knowledge.

But to a certain extent, transcultural knowledge has internal divisions. According to Welsch (ibid., 43) the concept of transcultural knowledge targets "[…] a complex and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive, understanding of culture. It would like to see a culture whose pragmatic performance consists of integration rather than exclusion. Encountering other forms of life never only involves differences but also connectivity. Such expansions that aim for the simultaneous recognition of different forms of identity within a society still constitute urgent tasks today." Hence, transcultural knowledge is knowledge about dealing with culture-specific differences in a sensitive, humane way. This is immediately intuitive and appears simple, but it is actually a contradiction. The recognition of cultural difference on the one hand, and the commitment to humanity as what people have in common ethically and morally according to their nature on the other, are not congruent. They can also be mutually contradictory. In practice, commonalities are sometimes simply put in place and implemented without thinking even though they may not even exist; or diversity is simulated in a general climate of agreement. In a practical understanding of transcultural knowledge, such contradictions, pretenses, and misjudgments are the rule.

In German-speaking countries, systems of difference operate with educational relevance under the designations "heterogeneity," "diversity," "plurality," and "inclusion." Their antonyms could be "homogeneity," "standardization," "conformity," "equality," "compliance," or "exclusion." The latter determines the systematization of difference in conformist majority cultures (such as that of Sweden, for example); in other words, in conformist cultural scripts, transcultural engagement is primarily derived from the imperatives of humanity and tolerance. This, however, cannot be treated in detail here.

In pedagogical contexts, "heterogeneity," "diversity," "plurality," and "inclusion" designate dispositions toward learning and a specific pedagogical way of dealing with them. Learning and pedagogical action are linked, in varying degrees of importance, to factors such as age, gender and sexual orientation, religion, worldview, mental and/or physical challenges, ethnic origin, and native language. Illness and mental and psychiatric challenges or those related to the trauma of war are missing from the list because they cannot be treated in detail here either. Pedagogical engagement in these terms can basically be characterized as one whose achievement is to criticize de-emphasizing specific experiences and forms of knowledge. When the issue of de-emphasizing specific experiences and forms of knowledge arises in pedagogical contexts,

it is usually treated from the perspective of acknowledging and developing options that would not be available via practical orientation toward the opposite. In the name of "heterogeneity," "diversity," "plurality," and "inclusion," we tend to de-emphasize experiences of social "homogeneity," "standardization," "conformity," "equality," "compliance," and "exclusion" – and the knowledge associated with them.

What is emphasized and what is de-emphasized must be analyzed with respect to their (power) effects. To give an example, in Germany in the wake of proclaiming a new beginning after its national socialistic past, it is difficult to address the national socialistic ideology of race. However, the systems of difference summoned by migration refer to this concept. In 2009 Githu Muigai, the UN Special Rapporteur on racism, wrote: "[…] in view of the new challenges facing Germany in the 21st century, there is a need to shift from a more circumscribed view of racism as associated to right-wing extremism to a broader understanding of the problem that takes into account the difficult challenges of integration and the recognition that racism occurs regularly in everyday life." Marginalized to the extreme right, the term "racism" is de-emphasized for society as a whole. This makes it difficult for people who experience racism to speak about it (Badawia 2002). An expansion in perspective to encompass the international discussion on racism could counteract this tendency (see for example Arndt & Ofuatey-Alazard 2011). Systems of difference with racist tendencies in migration societies are visible in German schools when the cultural knowledge of "*Migrationsanderen*," or immigrant others, as Mecheril et al. (2010) call them, is not appropriately represented in curricula and didactics. As long as school subjects continue to be approved by the majority culture, the cultural knowledge of minorities will typically be emphasized in discussion, mainly in the form of "talking about it," thereby according it an inferior status (see Geier 2014). Studies by Werner Helsper & Angelika Lingkost (2002) and Rudolf Leiprecht (2008) show in general that in educational institutions, differences relevant to learning and education among students can be obscured by the democratic postulates of equal rights and equal opportunity. This is always the case when a student is judged and found to "not *really* belong" to a context in a particular way. There are countless examples of implicit exclusion.

Spindler (1999, 466) describes the banalization and cover-up of discriminatory relationships, structures, and experiences as "cultural blindness." In order to question cultural hegemonies, a special sensitivity to context is required in addition to granting

fully equal participation in public goods and recognizing plurality. Context-sensitive practices are based on practical understanding, bringing subjects' individual abilities, sensibilities, dispositions, and assets to the fore in a given situation.

Transcultural Learning

Cultural assimilation is generally expected to produce a common basis of experience. However, as Arendt (1994) showed, this is an illusion. After all, the experiences of natives and cultural novices rest on entirely different foundations. Transcultural learning is also learning to deal and live with such differences. If we assume that cultural novices' efforts to assimilate and adapt inhibit their proactivity and social engagement, raising awareness of cultural blindness as well as explicit and silent forms of cultural knowledge becomes a curricular content of major societal relevance; and transcultural learning becomes a pedagogic task (see for example Nohl 2010; Spindler 1999; Takeda 2012; and Wulf 2006).

Transcultural knowledge is primarily learned implicitly, practically, and conjunctively–and in experiences of cultural foreignness that often have the characteristics of crisis. Typically, they are the enculturation processes associated with migration. According to Wulf (2009, 221 et seq.), enculturation is the mimetic "nestling" (*Anschmiegung*) with gestural, aesthetic, instrumental and linguistic actions in their social and material regularity. Plugging into foreign patterns of thought, feeling, and action establishes social and cultural belongingness. Such incorporation of patterns of perception, assessment, feeling, and acting is not necessarily explicit. "A complex web of knowledge bases" (Wulf 2009, 150) facilitates competent action and behavior in a foreign culture.

In engaging with one's own culture and foreign cultures, one can recognize one's own cultural blindness and that of others, depending on the relevant point of view, of course. Based on the transcultural knowledge acquired in this manner, it is possible to establish a mutual basis of experience. In summary, we can identify three basic approaches to transcultural learning:

First, in practices that support the recognition of diversity, issues include: the proof of such self-evident facts that are emphasized and de-emphasized by the experience, knowledge, and visions of certain social groups, and the criticism thereof. Second, the practical conditions of such emphasizing and de-emphasizing are identified and criticized in proclamations in a context-sensitive, strategic manner. Third, didactic opportunities are reinforced and created in which transcultural knowledge articulated in a de-emphasized

manner can be addressed. Ultimately, normative standards for shaping a transcultural educational area that anticipates cultural blindness can be derived from such articulations.

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