

The established intercultural training — a phase-out model?

350 interculturalists left the Sietar Europa Congress in Valencia with a bag full of inspiring ideas.

by Stéphanie Stephan, journalist

It was on May 21st, the World Day of Cultural Diversity and dialogue that a large number of interculturalists from many different countries walked in the sunny morning light of the wonderful historic centre of Valencia to the Centro Cultural where the 20th Sietar Europa Congress was about to be officially opened.

Entitled Refreshing the Culture Paradigm – Sharing Stories, Theories and next Practices a promising program with three highly reputed keynote speakers, a wide variety of intriguing workshops and presentations was to be going off during the next three days.

Located on the Mediterranean, the city which combines a rich heritage of Roman and Gothic history on one hand with the futuristic architecture of the Ciudad de les Arts i les Cinches (City of the Arts and Sciences) on the other was the best chosen location for this event. Also its bilingualism with Valencian/Catalan and standard Spanish had been a crucial factor for this decision.

While the presentation of the first keynote speaker Marta Williams entitled *Business, Butterflies and Destiny* was controversially discussed, the topic *Taking Storytelling to the Next Level* held by Sivasailam Thiagarajan, known as Thiagi got standing ovations. As the traditional storytelling puts the listeners in a passive position, the various techniques of interactive storytelling developed by Thiagi make the par-



ticipants create or co-create their own stories and share the stories with each other. Thiagi stated on the spot an example with the audience having prepared a story of an alien. By completing the story the listeners immediately understood the theme in greater depth. Transferring this experience to practice in intercultural trainings trainees apply their insights more mindfully. A side effect – but a very important one – is the fact that the exercises always take place in a very relaxed joyful atmosphere with a lot of fun.

Another very interesting exercise Thiagi confronted his audience with was the following: Imagine you were to tell the result of the congress in six!! words: One of the amazing answers came like a flash: stopped analyzing, started interacting, magic happened. Although on that very day I couldn't possibly already have made up my mind about the congress, I must say at the end of the three days this is absolutely relevant. But one after the other:

While I was asking myself after Marta Williams keynote speech what am I doing here, I decided to go to the workshop with exactly this title presented by Culture Waves and Radius, both based in Germany. Christine Wirths and her co-trainer Alexander Scheitza made the audience reflect on resistance in all its facets in an intercultural group training. From the motives of resistance, the way this feeling is communicated – making a difference between explicit, implicit

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Thiag, the Mozart of story telling

and nonverbal communication of same – to the target of resistance. It became evident that only during the preparation phase trainers have full control. Optimizing the prevailing circumstances and collecting critical incidents during the training makes the basis for a successful training. The majority of the participants in this workshop was very pleased with the handout of five practical take-aways.

Humor and empathy – qualities for good collaboration

During the last Sietar Europe congress in Talinn two years ago Piotr Piuta presented a workshop on humor in intercultural trainings, a topic which at the time was rather exceptional for interculturalists. This time he was here again. Together with Stefan Meister he gave a workshop entitled *Humor – Introducing a New Dimension in Cross-Cultural Consultancy*. After two short videos taken in the underground of Berlin and New York and a couple of fun-group exercises which those present enjoyed very much both trainers encouraged the participants to let them know about their humor preferences after the congress, in order to develop an instrument that will help teams use humor more and better. Let's hope that many congress attendees will follow this invitation! We all know that on one hand humor is crucial for good collaboration, but at the same time it often becomes the 'elephant in the room' in many groups and teams.

Another topic fitting in the same category was empathy or

compassion. It goes without saying that empathy is deeply embedded in interpersonal and also intercultural sensitivity. However nowadays it is not more than a buzzword, an emotional shortcut to experience moral solidarity without 'human' feelings or emotional involvement as Patrick Schmidt put it. While tuning in to the needs and feelings of another person is actually a prerequisite to empathy, which in turn can lead to understanding, concern and, if the circumstances are right, compassionate action.

In the lively discussion which developed after the presentation entitled *Deconstructing the Empathy Craze*, examples of stereotypes were mentioned such as that Japanese in general are very empathetic, while Indians don't have any empathy which is underlined by their attitude of looking down on the untouchable. It was regrettable that there was no more time than only 30 minutes for this presentation. This also applies to a couple of others I went to. When it came to the interesting arguments time was over. It would be desirable to allow the presentations on future congresses to last ten to fifteen minutes longer.

Discussion on the future of Sietar Europa

One of the Sietar Europe congress' workshops in its own right dealt with the future of the organization. On the panel were the president of Sietar UK, Dr. Barbara Gibson, the former president of the Board of Directors of Sietar Europa,

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Professor Dr. Stefanie Rathje giving her keynote speech.

Vincent Merk, the board member and president of Sietar Europa from 2001 to 2005, Francine Wieringa and Joe Kearns from Ireland, who will organize the next Sietar Europa congress in Dublin in two years' time. The session was moderated by Dr. Livingstone Thompson, the then still present president.

A number of key issues was explored like relevance of the stated purpose and mission of the association, the specific organisational skills/competencies that need to be developed, the main threats and opportunities facing Sietar Europa and changes that the Sietar leadership must consider in the coming two to three years. It was agreed that it is up to the members to decide whether Sietar Europe should get involved in politics and make statements as to the political situation in the world. All panel members wanted the General Assembly to take place at the same time as the Sietar Europe congress. Young Sietar was praised as being managed very professionally and the question was raised how Sietar Europe could become more attractive to Young Sietar members. All panel members agreed that in the near future the proper identity of Sietar Europa should be reviewed and a shift within the organization should take place. Joe Kearns expressed the wish that Sietar Europe in the future should be known as the go-to organization for cultural issues in the world.

The third keynote speech, held by Professor Dr. Stefanie Rathje of the Berlin University of Applied Sciences, con-

fronted the audience with a provoking thesis: *Multicollectivity. It changes everything*. Professor Rathje explained why traditional intercultural trainings cause a number of problems like stereotyping or fostering adverse group dynamics. In her view, they prove more and more to be ineffective if not counterproductive. In the past these problems have been marginalized as simple quality problems. However they are not just side effects, but put the overall effectiveness of intercultural trainings into question. It's by no means the fault of incompetent trainers. They must always occur according to Professor Rathje because the underlying culture paradigm is wrong.

Based on the concept of multicollectivity, she proposed a revised understanding of interculturality and intercultural competence. If we take these findings seriously, she argued, it becomes clear that the world needs new forms of intercultural trainings based on a revised culture paradigm, which in the long run could be the contribution to peace in the world. Judging from the applause Professor Rathje got for her research efforts, it seemed as if many of the interculturalists present would take her request to heart.

With the presentation of the new Sietar Europa President Claude Bourgeois from Sietar France during the gala diner and the perspective for the next Sietar Europa Congress to take place in Dublin in 2017, the 20th congress was closed in a cheerful atmosphere.

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