

## **Towards a Concept of Interculturality Based on Praxis: The Seminar and the Youth Library**

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### **Introduction**

Widely popular cultural strategies, among them the editorial policies for youth, have shown their limitations in being able to foster fundamental aspects of intercultural relations such as respect towards others, dialogue, agreements, pacts and tolerance. The project for the book collection "Among voices ... tell me" seeks to partially make up for these limitations by being a venue to discuss certain current topics in the global context, as well as the local strategies, their survival and the changing world of Wixaritari and western youth. The topics put forth in this book collection will allow us to advance in the understanding of modern western and indigenous practices and in this manner will encourage the understanding of the numerous dimensions which permeate intercultural relations.

Based on the research on indigenous communicative forms that the senior author has been conducting for the past 8 years in the Huichol communities of San Miguel Huaixtita and San Andrés Cohamiata (Corona 2001, 2004), in addition to the academic evaluations conducted on Wixaritari and western youth, I have proposed an intercultural youth library. In a parallel manner, I seek to theorize on intercultural communication and education with the construction and analysis of this project as a starting point. Firstly, I shall briefly describe the way the seminar operated in order to then make some observations regarding intercultural relations and producing joint texts for young people.

Based on 8 questions considered of current interest for the indigenous and western youths, 10 Wixaritari professors and 10 western professors were invited to participate in an intercultural seminar in order to assemble a library for young people. The first were teachers at the Tatutsi Maxakwaxi junior high school, with experience in teaching youths and the latter were professors at the University of Guadalajara and the Autonomous University of Querétaro, considered specialists in the topics under consideration. Eight topics of current interest were selected with the objective of compelling today's youth to question themselves regarding their needs, concerns and interests. These topics are work and money, beauty, addictions, love and sexuality, the histories of Mexico, health, law, justice and social coexistence and communications and politics. Another aspect taken into consideration was the current importance of the topics as opposed to the concept, frequently utilized in textbooks and the mass media, where references to indigenous culture are limited to the historic and ethnic past, far removed from the current situation of contemporary indigenous peoples.

The seminar lasted 20 hours and took place in a hotel in the city of Guadalajara. The participants, invited in their role as "researchers", had previously prepared a brief text on one of the 8 topics. After a general presentation of the goals of the seminar and the particular interest of each of the participants, an explanation on books for children and older youth and indigenous books in particular was presented. The contents and formats of national and

foreign publications were analyzed. Data was presented which demonstrates that youth, both in the indigenous and urban context, read fewer books starting in the second year of junior high school.<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that from the first to the third year in the three schools, reading of books and stories diminished as academic levels increased. The conclusion was that the youth probably do not read because there are no books available which interest them.

A workshop on designing books for children and older youth was conducted. Based on a variety of books which showed graphic means which directly affect the content of the book, practices were conducted among the researchers, with the goal of understanding how typography and page design transform the possibilities of reading.

Afterwards, the texts prepared by each researcher were read and commented on. Two other papers were presented: one dealt with the National Youth Survey (ENJ 2000) and a description of the consumer practices of urban youth, their values, tastes, preferences, goals, etc. The second paper dealt with literary genres directed towards showing possible formats in writing for children and older youth.

After the information sessions, opinions were exchanged by the Wixarika and western researchers by topics. The results of this exchange were presented at a general meeting. From this experience and the drafts of the researchers' texts, we arrived at the following conclusions which are seen as the first precepts for the intercultural youth library and the first reflections on communication, interculturality and education.

#### **Extra-textual Conditions**

We met with multiple extra-textual conditions which, in great measure, defined the relations and had an impact on the texts which were written. At this point, I will only mention three of them: the perception of time, of space and of authorship. Regarding the perception of time, it was noted that, throughout the workshop, the western contingent made a different use of time: even though they had all reserved the dates to be able to be present during the workshop's activities to be conducted during those days, the sessions were fragmented by the irremediable reference of western daily chores: meal schedules, break times, home and schedules. These fragments, from the western point of view, should not be combined, and thus there was a constant worry to be on time. Nevertheless, it was the westerners themselves who transgressed the limits of these set times: the western teachers tended to arrive late at all scheduled times, interrupting their chores to attend to other affairs via telephone. They felt concerned about wrapping things up, making progress, finishing before time ran out, et cetera. In contrast, the Wixaritari teachers arrived exclusively for the workshop, and therefore their idea was that the 24 hours in the day should be continuously dedicated to issues related to the workshop. Their extreme punctuality at the starting time could not be explained by the logic of any watch, but by their inclination to be there, to attend. Thus, there were no set times for them. The idea did not cross their mind that something would remain undone if more time

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<sup>1</sup> Reading among youths in urban technical junior high schools diminishes from 39.47% in the first year to 22.22% in the third year; reading among the youths in the Wixarika junior high school (distance learning) diminished from 66.66% in the first year to 33.33% in the third and youths in the Tatutsi Maxakwaxi school also read less from the first year to the third with 67.85% and 55.55% (Corona 2004).

were spent on one thing rather than on another. This had a great impact on the western authors and by the second day, they had all adapted to the Wixaritari perception of time.

The differences regarding the use of space also conditioned the dialogue and had an impact on the image that each one had formed of one another. The subtle divisions between what is public and what is private seemed almost dramatically different: while the western teachers sought an asceticism for their workspaces, which they consider to be public, that is, from whence others view and judge us, the Wixaritari thought of it as part of their everyday space, that is, neither public nor private. The westerners strove not to make their family reference points evident, for example, and they made attempts to hide personal affairs by whispering in a corner on the phone. The Wixaritari transported us to their everyday atmosphere: children, caregivers, food, play, family, work, reflections, everything found a place within the same space. For the westerner, for example, it was strange to see that the caregiver of the children of a couple formed by two Wixaritari authors, did not become upset and was attentive to the discussions on the books while the child wailed in the middle of the room, or to see the child's parents playing on the floor of the meeting room with the child while remaining attentive to the on-going discussions on interculturality. Those differences, more than merely catching our attention, demonstrated that which was conditioning our texts, which in turn, conditioned the dialogue.

Regarding authorship, there was also a distinction. For the western teacher, it was clear that his name should appear in some part of the book to be published, as he had participated in its creation. The western academic system rewards precisely that: documentary proof that something had been written. Nevertheless, for the Wixarika, the issue of authorship brought up a different dilemma. They did not see themselves as authors of the texts, but rather as spokespeople of the discourses which belong to the Wixaritari. Therefore, their names should not appear in the books or this should first be consulted with their community. From their point of view, including someone's name meant that that person declared himself the owner of the words therein expressed. The problem was that the words, above all those which intended to show cultural differences and similarities, did not belong to anyone, but to all, authors and non authors. If they signed their name to the book, someone, some of them, could be accused of wanting to steal the word in order to become rich off the shared words. For the westerner, this is inconceivable: in the first place, because no one gets rich from selling books and, secondly, because the written word belongs to the person who writes it. This logic regarding ownership does not pertain to the mechanical act of writing, but refers to the validation system of what is written. For the westerner, what he writes belongs to him inasmuch as he can validate this before an academic community. He must prove knowledge and autonomy (visible in the game of quotations and other distinctions between what the author contributes based on justifiable sources) among other things. This is what allows his name to appear in the book and for it to have academic value. For the Wixaritari, what validates his word is his community as he is talking about his community precisely. His community is that which can say whether his word is true or false, if he is stating the truth or is telling lies. Therefore, the word he speaks is not his own, but of the community. Authorship, then, concerned the Wixarika and appeared as a topic which should be discussed under the same terms as the content of the book: there should be an agreement regarding how the author credits were to appear.

With these participants and under these conditions, the dialogues were undertaken and the conflicts arising from building an intercultural text were met. The results are complex

texts which for the first time reflect that which interculturality generates, texts which teach just by the mere act of having been written.

### The Texts

The dynamics which arose in assembling the texts for the library varied according to the type of dissertation, the topic and the expectations each author had brought with him with regards to the text. Such dynamics can be summarized in four distinct strategies which were followed during the construction of the common text, the dialogical text. I will illustrate at this point both the dynamics and the strategies I am referring to:

1. Monological text resulting from the imposition of one voice. This result, translated into a strategy, consisted in creating one type of power relationship in which one of the participants in the dialogue, in one way or another, was able to impose his discourse (including the hierarchy-creating structures) upon the text to be created.

a. Monological text from the imposition of the mestizo voice. This type of text can be illustrated by the type of text obtained for the topic of the occupational aspirations and socioeconomic notions. Although the Wixarika authors acknowledged a type of economic order and cultural logic within their community which sustained the type of occupational aspirations held by their youth, they admitted that the economic order and the existing occupational aspirations were those proposed by the mestizos. Therefore, they agreed that a sole text be created in which they would only specify some variable with respect to the Wixarika reality (variables of savings, of bartering, of management, aspirations, et cetera), but which would remain respectful of the structure, language, jargon, concepts and order of the text previously prepared by the mestizo teachers, specialists in economic and labor market issues.

b. Monological text resulting from the imposition of the Wixarika voice. In reality, this did not occur as such, but there was a certain dynamics which approached this. It occurred in the text relating to love and sexuality. The western teacher, from the western point of view, set forth a "typical" content in a sexuality text: birth control methods, physical consequences of experiencing pleasure, the human body and reproduction, stated in such a way that the emphasis lay on the responsibilities brought about by experiencing one's sexuality. The Wixarika teacher insisted that these contents were not apt for the youth, especially for Wixarika youth. Therefore, he did not wish for these topics to be dealt with, not even considering the possibility of creating two texts. He wished to discuss the importance of experiencing sexuality until after marriage, not before. Therefore, the content of the text, in his opinion, should deal with the description of the marital relationship and the criteria for selecting a spouse. The mestizo teachers insisted that the facts of life for youth today made it necessary to speak of the aforementioned topics. The Wixarika teacher insisted that the community would not be in agreement with these books if they dealt with such information. It was not agreed upon whether one or two texts would be prepared. But certainly, the voice of the Wixarika professor conditioned the creation of this intercultural text.

2. Double text modified by the presence of the other, that is to say, interconnected by a series of inter-texts which indicate some type of dialogue. That is, the creation of two texts, each one written based on its authors' cultural points of reference, with brief links which made

reference to one another. These links arose from the need to find points of dialogue. These points were not enough to justify a third text, but merely permitted sharing certain points of interest. This was observed, for example, in the creation of the text on beauty. The mestizo author assured that beauty, for today's youth should necessarily refer to the human body: body care, keeping fit, the rules of appreciation of the beauty of the body, conflicts and diseases arising from an excessive attention to one's body, et cetera. The Wixarika author, on the other hand, insisted that beauty, in her community, was tied to the traditional Wixarika costume, its colors and shape. This aesthetic conception had nothing to do with the way the youth dealt with their traditional clothes, but with the way in which the ancestors had taught them to appreciate and conceive of the type of costume they wore. They could not reach an agreement on whether to discuss the body or the costume, but they did agree on certain points where dialogue is possible, or, at least, the acknowledgement of the differences between these two positions.

3. A sole text, dialogical in type, which refers to the other two texts through inter-texts. That is, the creation of a third dialogical text, but making references to those two texts. This case was experienced when building the text on Mexican history. Throughout the workshop, both authors discussed how Mexico and its history should be conceived. Both possible versions of this dialogue came to light, but also references were made to various other possible versions. In the end, they agreed to write a critical history, far from the monolithic nation-state concept, where all versions would have a place.

4. Two monological texts with no attempts at dialogue. That is, two texts which are in no way linked to each other. Various texts followed this dynamic, where it was agreed that one book would be created starting from two totally distinct texts and with no dialogical reference points. Translation of these texts into the other language and the presence of both responses to the same topic would allow for the intercultural exercise.

Although the dialogue during the construction of the books began with both cultures on equal terms, the conditions established certain advantages for the mestizo-westerners: the text was written in Spanish, following editorial criteria and western production processes. Despite this advantage, as was observed, the struggle gives rise to different results. The cultural voices come to be heard in a different manner. The result, then, is not a text which struggles to impose its own voice above the voice of another culture, but a complex text which envisages its own points of reference.

### **Conclusion**

Walter Benjamin allows us to consider a constitutive aspect of what we have come to call intercultural problems when he states that: "a capacity which would seem to us inalienable, the surest amongst the sure, is being withdrawn: the capacity to exchange experiences." Narration of experiences, belonging to oral traditions and early forms of coexistence, are now rare in our midst and our time. Thus, the task of writing books for the youth has once again posed the challenge of what to say and how to say it. There is one further task of great importance for researchers: to create knowledge based on the distinct forms of understanding intercultural education. What remains to be done is: to define the particular character of the field of study, its actors, its factors and its dynamics.

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