

CHAPTER 18

Becoming a cultural mediator in Switzerland

Vero Schoeffel



Veronique (Vero) Schoeffel helped to start DELTA in South Africa. After five years she returned to Switzerland, where she works as a consultant and trainer running workshops for people preparing to work in a culture different from their own. She has also done much international work in places such as Madagascar, Bolivia, Zambia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ireland. She aims to empower people and teams by increasing their intercultural competence.

In this chapter she shows how the Training for Transformation methodology and philosophy were used in training the caretakers in large blocks of flats in Switzerland in intercultural competence.

At the end of the programme the caretakers had expanded their conception of their role, from just caretakers responsible for the upkeep of the buildings to building understanding and acceptance among tenants from many countries and cultures living under the same roof. As one of them said: 'I did not understand people from other cultures. Now I am a cultural mediator.'

A feather alone is a delicate thing, yet it carries a bird all over the world. *Sudanese proverb*

I am a French woman who studied translation and international development at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in the 1980s. At that time, I was involved in the Young Christian Students (YCS) movement and this changed my way of thinking. Through YCS, I became sensitive to the struggle against apartheid and met courageous South Africans including Father Albert Nolan and Sibusiso Bengu, as well as a number of South African students and teachers. I decided to spend some time in South Africa as a volunteer, to learn and to give form to my ideal of a more just world.

I joined a Swiss organization that prepared volunteers for assignments overseas, and I started attending preparation workshops. One day a woman came to tell us about her experience in South Africa. She showed us a set of books called *Training for Transformation* (TfT). I looked into them and found them powerful. However, she immediately added that I would not be able to buy them in South Africa because they were banned by the government for being 'too dangerous'. I remembered the books and the names of the authors and went to Cape Town.

One year later, the news spread in the community of development practitioners that Anne Hope, one of the authors of TfT, was back from exile, and that she would settle in Cape Town. She offered a class at the University of Cape Town on adult education, based on TfT methodology. I registered, met Anne, and loved the programme. Anne and I became friends. She was about to start the DELTA programme in Cape Town. Our energies and skills were very complementary, and when she invited me to join her in this new adventure I accepted with joy. Working with Anne changed my way of training and influenced my life deeply. Together, we started DELTA in the Cape and the Grail movement in the Western Cape. We were soon joined by two wonderful South African women: Dikeledi Xorile and Nabawaya Wessels.

After five years living and-working in Cape Town, I went back to Europe, specialized in intercultural communication, and continued working nationally and internationally, focusing on the interface

between development, intercultural competence, and empowerment, using the philosophical foundation and the participatory methodology I learned through TtT.

My work today

Currently I work with multicultural groups or with professionals working across cultures. The aim is to expand our concept of culture, to discover some fundamental similarities and differences across cultures, and to develop the art of moving across cultures in culturally appropriate ways, in order to 'negotiate shared common meaning', as Stella Ting-Toomey says in her book *Communicating Across Cultures*. This shared common meaning is central for any common project to develop and be sustainable.

This chapter focuses on one of the groups I have worked with. It highlights how workshops on intercultural communication combined with a TtT approach can be deeply empowering.

I chose a group in Switzerland, to underline that empowerment processes need to happen in Europe as well. I was blessed to work with a group of caretakers in a large, multicultural town in Switzerland. These professionals look after blocks of flats that, under the same roof, host dozens of families from all over the world. The tenants behave in very different ways, which are often unintelligible to the caretakers, who hold many solid keys in their hands but sometimes lack the intercultural one. Caretakers are not the most prestigious professional group. They are often under-respected and under-acknowledged. People think of them only when the corridor needs cleaning, when the water does not run, or when the light does not switch on. Generally, the profession gets more criticism and harsh words than recognition and appreciation.

Caretakers as cultural mediators

Marta Pinto, a young woman in charge of integration programmes in the town, had a vision: in addition to being repairers of broken taps and cleaners of staircases and laundry spaces, these professionals could become key players enabling multicultural and multi-religious communication among those living together under one roof. I accepted her invitation to design a programme that aimed to develop intercultural competence for the caretakers whom she invited to attend the training. The group met four times over two months, and again a few months later in two additional workshops, in order to share experience and deepen knowledge. Between each session, participants were invited to apply their newly gained knowledge. The challenges and joys of this practice were shared at the beginning of the following training session.

Empowerment and participation were at the heart of our process. The need to talk and share their professional challenges was originally more acute than the wish to develop intercultural skills. In a true TtT spirit, the first session was thus largely dedicated to creating trust, sharing experiences, and giving each other appreciation and support. In a profession where appreciation is very scarce, deep listening and honest appreciation are empowering. Laughing or crying together about the terribly rude or disrespectful attitudes of some tenants is healing.

TtT practitioners know that community work is neither sustainable nor transforming unless it is based on trust, deep listening, and affirmation. Many processes and exercises have been developed over the years for this purpose, as included in the four TtT books by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, and Partners' two books called *Partners Companion to Training for Transformation*.

As time went by and the hearts of the caretakers became lighter, we focused the work on culture, cultural differences, cultural identity, and intercultural competence. Theoretical inputs and new tools were woven into the process, offering new knowledge and new perspectives. We approached the complex concept of culture bit by bit, and explored its implications for our behaviour. We realized that our behaviour is determined both by our personality and by our culture.



Cultural differences and mutual understanding

Using stories, films, and our own personal experiences as codes, we discovered that verbal and non-verbal communication is very different from one culture to the next. This leads to misunderstanding among the tenants. Value differences are at the heart of this misunderstanding.

Non-verbal communication

In some cultures, we learn to look into the eyes of the person we talk to, as a sign of respect and interest. In other cultures, respect and interest is shown by not looking at the person, but by looking down. So if people with these two different cultural patterns greet each other, both may be offended. The first one's perception will be 'that person is so rude, they do not look at me when talking to me'. The second may well think 'this person is so rude, challenging me by looking straight at me, and showing no respect'.

We discovered that eye contact is not the only area in which we need to get new cultural knowledge. Touch, use of space, volume of voice, clothing, and silence are just a few other dimensions of communication that are expressed differently from one culture to the next.

We talked about the implications of these differences in a block of flats, and about the role caretakers could play in explaining non-verbal differences to tenants who feel uneasy about the behaviour of others, and how they could try to negotiate spaces where tenants feel respected in their ways while also respecting other tenants' ways. One major discussion was about respecting the different smells coming out of each kitchen, where different foods are prepared and cooked in different ways. How can each family be more careful about the strong smells they produce, while being more tolerant about smells they are not used to?

Another important step was realizing that shaking hands is not the only polite way of greeting; participants who had decided that 'these people are so rude' realized that there were other ways to greet each other. They became interested in learning more about greetings and their meaning. Some even decided to try to practise new ways of greeting where it seemed appropriate.

Verbal communication

The same discovery took place when we talked about verbal communication. The most striking example was around direct and indirect communication. Direct communication involves saying what I mean as I feel it, straight out. Indirect communication means saying the same thing in a different way, in order not to hurt the other person and not to lose face. The meaning is not in the words but in the context. This cultural difference is an issue when people using different styles talk about delicate issues such as solving conflicts, saying no, or talking about disagreements. The direct communicator will say 'I disagree with you'; the indirect communicator will offer statements such as 'this is an interesting proposal' or 'I'll think about it', which actually mean 'I disagree' in an indirect style.

Interculturally competent caretakers understand various communication styles and develop the skill of adapting their style to the style of their interlocutor. This is not just about being polite. It is about a paradigm shift: 'How can I say the same thing in a different way?'

Cultural values

Cultural values and beliefs are behind our cultural behaviour. The caretakers reflected on the cultural values guiding their life and their work before exploring other values they encountered among their tenants. We looked at films where cultural value differences led to dramatic or hilarious situations, and realized the relationship between values and behaviour. One film was *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* directed by Joel Zwick. It is a comedy showing how a multicultural couple (she is Greek, he is European-American) goes from one surprise to the next as their families mingle during the preparation for their marriage.

Whether a wedding is the affair of two people, two families, or two villages depends on the cultural values of those involved. How many people come to the block of flats to celebrate a wedding and how long for, and how loud the celebration will be, also vary.

Funerals raise similar questions. Do people grieve in the intimacy of the family, or do relatives and friends come to express their grief and support the family? When does one give a sign but stay distant, in order not to disturb the grieving family? When does one pay a visit in order to support them in their grief? How long does one stay? When does one offer to bring food?

One of the caretakers told the story of a tenant coming to her to report that in a neighbouring flat the woman had been crying a lot over the past few days. She was worried, and wondered if the husband was abusing her, and if there was anything she could do. The caretaker reassured her, telling her that actually the woman was weeping for her mother, who had died recently in a faraway country. As a refugee, she could not go back to mourn. In her culture, loud crying is appropriate in that situation. The tenant decided to pay that woman a visit and to support her in this lonely grieving.

When caretakers organize timetables for use of the common washing machine, what competence do they need in order to deal with the fact that people and cultures do not all relate to time in the same way? Some will consider a time commitment as sacred, and will always clear their laundry away before the deadline. Others will always consider this time as an indication, an attempt, but they may give priority to something else that seems more urgent or important to them than emptying the washing machine for the next tenant.

And now?

It was wonderful to watch people grow over the sessions, moving from being interculturally sceptical, sometimes racist, to being interculturally competent. When people understand the meaning behind the behaviour, they can depersonalize it. Through practising empathy, they can join the other in his or her experience, and share it.

Today, a number of caretakers have broadened their perception of their role and have started to function as cultural mediators between tenants of different cultures, making the people living together richer and less tense in their block of flats. The press and the radio reported on this pilot experience and other towns became interested in developing similar programmes for their caretakers. The programme is constantly adjusting to new contexts, and while it is transforming caretakers' intercultural competence, it is being transformed itself.

Success factors for intercultural empowerment

Over the past few years, I have worked with many multicultural groups in many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and central and western Europe. Looking back on these

experiences, common factors emerge that contribute to the empowering effect of intercultural training:

- Group processes are more meaningful than individual learning.
- It takes time and practice to walk the road to intercultural competence. Training over a few sessions and practice in between has proven to be the best way to move from knowledge to competence.
- Respectful listening and dialogue about generative themes are essential.
- The focus should not only be on sharing new knowledge, but on empowering people, on trusting in their potential.
- The learning is more powerful if participants have similar roles or functions.
- The learning is deeper if the theoretical inputs are directly connected to people's reality.

Transformation witnessed in participants

- Greater clarity about their own cultural identity.
- Acquisition of knowledge about other cultures and about intercultural communication.
- Greater self-confidence.
- Reduction in stereotypical or racist statements.
- Greater respect for difference.
- Expansion of their role.
- Growing interest in other cultures – and in their own.
- Transformation of the perception of cultural difference – from superiority to interest.
- More positive energy.
- More joy in their work and across cultures.
- Lower stress across cultures and the capacity to cope with uncertainty.
- Trying to understand before judging.
- Awareness of the difficulties and limits of intercultural competence.

What I learned and what I would do differently now

- I became realistic about what is achievable if the time available for the training is short: some new knowledge, but not new skills, and no change in world view.
- I became careful about using participatory exercises in multicultural groups as they may not be culturally appropriate for all participants.
- I learned to be aware of the language and the communication styles of the group. I had to identify where I needed to expand my competence in order to respect everyone's styles.
- People will not open up to intercultural communication if there is something more immediate on their plate. I realized I had to listen to people's central issues first if I wanted them to focus their attention on the topic of the workshop.
- Like any other competence, intercultural competence needs attention, knowledge, and practice in order to develop and become interiorized. It is not enough to 'be nice' nor to 'just be yourself' to be an interculturally competent (TfT) trainer!

References

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