CARING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS: AN INTER-RELIGIOUS MEDITERRANEAN EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

RONALD G. SULTANA

Introduction

*F*ollowing on from a conference jointly organised in the year 2000 by the University of Malta's *Future Generations Programme,* the *Comparative Education Programme* and Unesco, representatives from the three monotheistic religions from around the Mediterranean have embarked on the first phase of an ambitious and at the same time eminently practical project: to produce a teaching text which would help adolescents learn about and reflect upon the knowledge and beliefs of the three Abrahamic religions, with a view to promoting the values announced by Unesco regarding the responsibilities of present generations towards the generations of the future. To do so in a way that engages the frameworks of relevance of young people, and to speak to them in contemporary 'language', entails the planning of a 'text' which has written, visual, and information technology-based elements. The ambition is to provide a teaching resource pack for teachers of the Mediterranean region, who can draw upon the material prepared in order to include it in carefully selected curricular spaces – dedicated to religious instruction or otherwise – in both formal and non-formal educational settings.

The team put together by the project leader, Rev. Professor Emmanuel Agius, was required to have two key strengths: members of the team had to be pedagogues, with an understanding of the psychological, sociological, philosophical and methodological aspects of teaching adolescents; and they also had to have an intimate knowledge of at least one of the three monotheistic religions.

Each member of the team prepared a paper which addressed different aspects of the Unesco declaration for Future Generations, and developed a pedagogical presentation that could be integrated within the parameters of the overall project. Many of these presentations are contextualised in a solid theoretical framework, making important connections between general philosophical and theological principles, and their practical application within pedagogical situations.

Challenges

Several challenges had to be overcome almost from the very outset of the project. As different papers and pedagogical material were prepared, it soon became obvious that, despite the deeply rooted affinities between the three religions, the question of dealing with differences within the context of what ultimately is an ecumenical text had to be addressed. The setting is clear: the project is really about an essentially *human* journey, where believers and non-believers alike share a quest for dignified living, both for themselves and in their role as custodians of the earth for future generations. The question – and challenge – is: What do the Abrahamic religions bring to this journey, to this quest? The three faiths reflect a common heritage, and draw on common – or should one perhaps say *un*common – wisdom. They act as a *prism* through which to reflect on fundamental matters of regional and global concern. As such, they add value to the human search for meaning, one with which adolescents can easily and readily connect. While emphasising the similarities between the three faiths, it is also considered important to acknowledge, respect and ultimately celebrate the differences both within and between the religions, with each faith being presented as providing plausible insights and signposts for the journey, and with each faith being worthy of respect. It is also considered important that the text resonate with the non-adherent, and that religion is therefore not presented as dogma, but rather as a cultural phenomenon, as an experience and a relationship that is lived in an intense and meaningful manner. The text that has to be prepared must therefore strive to be a 'multi-perspectival portrait, one that is collaboratively constructed and acceptable to the non-adherent as well' (Serracino Inglott, 2000).

Language and communication: a central leitmotif

Despite the number of issues raised by the Unesco declaration on the Rights of Future Generations, and despite the different insights that the respective faiths represented at the Malta workshop generated, it is nevertheless possible to identify a common thematic that provides the connective tissue for all the contributions to the project. First of all, the fact that the text-in-process is being targeted at adolescents means that the theme of 'identity' becomes particularly central. Different schools of psychology – particularly those which emphasise a life-stage, life-task approach – highlight the fact that identity-formation and the discovery and nurturing of a sense of self-identity is of critical importance in adolescence, and that this holds true across a variety of cultures (see, *inter alia*,

Coleman & Hendry, 1996; Couger & Galabos, 1999). Social psychological approaches also highlight the importance that the project of self-identity has for adolescents in the context of solidary relationships. Despite the fact that adolescence is constructed differently in different cultural and social settings, that phase in life does seem to signal, across the Mediterranean region, a time for both intra- and inter-personal discovery, for reaching in and reaching out in ever more meaningful ways. The reality of 'multiple identities' and of 'cross-border identities' in an increasingly complex world makes the challenge of 'knowing oneself' and 'communicating with others' more acute (McLaren & Giroux, 1997).

This dynamic and challenging process of communication with the self and with others recalls a fundamental thematic: that of language. For all the three Abrahamic faiths, the central distinguishing reality is that 'God speaks to humanity' – God has revealed Himself, and that revelation is recorded in a Book. That is what sets the three religions apart from several other faiths, and places them within the same revelatory tradition. It is not only God who talks to humanity, but also humanity that 'speaks' to each other, developing a code of conduct that induces and facilitates respect for the worth and dignity of others, across space and time. And over and beyond the religious context for such communication, education acts as a vehicle for the learning of 'languages', a tool for the induction into the stance and skills of dialogue with different communities.

That dialogue – between God and humanity, and humanity with itself – has to be represented in the text in such a way that it interpellates and connectes with critical socio-economic and cultural issues as these are reflected in the Unesco declaration. What did it mean to be stewards of the earth in terms of our obligations to future generations? What sorts of relationships have to be fostered – under the guidance of the three faiths, and inspired by God's revealed truth – so that the dignity of persons, the right to cultural diversity and heritage, the freedom from discrimination, and so on can be guaranteed for tomorrow's citizens? More specifically, the text has to connect with concrete issues, such as the difficulties of teaching multiculturalism to, say, Italian adolescents whose employment prospects are threatened because refugee workers from the South of the Mediterranean accept to work for lower wages.

In that sense, therefore, the text has to present the rights of tomorrow's world citizens as the *obligations* of the citizens of today. Adolescents would therefore be challenged to reflect on the Unesco Declaration via grounded texts which start from every-day experiences, and through references to contemporary socio-economic, political and cultural realities.

Teaching goals

Taking their cue from the recent report on education by the Unesco commission chaired by Jacques Delors (1996) the team of pedagogists have highlighted the need for adolescents to be guided in terms of the four main pillars of education, namely:

- *To know:* i.e., the cognitive element, since it is ignorance that leads to fear and intolerance;
- *To be:* i.e. it is not enough to know: knowledge has to be inspired by values and wisdom;
- *To do:* i.e. these values have to become visible through actions in the real world: a commitment towards promoting the rights of future generations
- *To be together:* i.e. the ultimate skill in increasingly complex and heterogeneous social formations.

Each unit of learning in the Teaching Pack on the *Three Faiths and our Obligations to Future Generations* will be structured along these four pillars, with adolescents being encouraged to understand the complexity of the issues, but also to develop the skills and personality structure required to confront the challenges of the Unesco declaration, in the light of faith.

Pedagogical/representational tools

The theme of communication, the awareness of the importance of the medium as the message for communication (McLuhan, 1996) the acknowledgement of the exposure of contemporary adolescents to the stimulating communicative strategies of the media – one and all have led members of the team to highlight the importance of developing pedagogical and representational tools that are both attractive and effective in vehicling the message of the text.

The educators are drawing on their experience and expertise to both propose and give examples of interactive and modern pedagogies that could breathe life into the text. Among the several ideas that have been discussed thus far, one can highlight the following:

- An inter-religious laboratory, where, following Dewey's (1916) insight, tolerance – like democracy – could be learnt by living in a tolerant environment.
- Experiential learning, where values are appreciated through social games, such as role play, simulation, and so on.

- Visual stimula, including cartoons, photographs and video excerpts that would increase the opportunity for students to make the connection between abstract principles and everyday experiences and concerns.
- New technology, such as CD-Rom-based material and hypertext, media which are greatly appreciated by young people and which provide a degree of interactivity which is an advantage over traditional, one-dimensional, static texts.
- Dilemma-based pedagogy, with real case-studies helping students appreciate the complex nature of the values upheld by the Unesco declaration, and with the faiths contributing insights as to how such values can be safeguarded.
- Careful and wise choice of texts – whether sacred or other – which encourage reflection and thought.
- Research projects as a strategy to engage with the world as it is, in order to imagine a world as it could – and *should* – be.
- The use of common symbols and key images which members of the three faiths can recognise and associate with, and which mark the text at regular intervals in order to facilitate cultural
- Developing a Mediterranean pedagogy, through the use of Mediterranean cultural resources, the use of 'parables' as the archetypical pedagogical resource, and the celebration of regional teaching traditions.

An agenda to complete

Now that the parameters of the teacher's resource pack have been established, the different learning units have to be written, drawing on the knowledge and pedagogical approaches proposed in the different papers presented at the workshop. Teams of pedagogues with experience in text-book production for young adolescents have to meet; model units have to be composed and piloted; and art work, illustrations and IT-based material have to be prepared. The challenges ahead seem arduous, as many textbook authors have noted (see, *inter alia*,Venezky, 1992), but the task – which from the outset promised to be well-nigh impossible, now increasingly appears to be feasible, and certainly well-worth the effort, and can become a reality if further funding is secured. For ultimately, it is through education that we can enhance the openness to each other, to the generations that are yet to be born, and to the transcendental arch of caring that, in the Abrahamic religions, is given the name of God. And it is through education that prejudice can be overcome, so that faiths become a bridge towards furthering understanding rather than a trigger for discord in this troubled region.

References

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