*A 3-D Play Area for Life Orientation*

1. *Life Orientation out of the Perspective of Learners*

The aim of this short presentation is to trigger your attention for the subject *Life Orientation out of the perspective of Learners.* In the last twenty years I have developed with other teachers, teacher trainers and researchers a model called *A 3D Learning Place for Life Orientation* in order to create a learner oriented approach for worldview education focusing on creativity, dialogical learning and critical thinking.

2. *The urgency of such an approach*

In the field of Religious Education such an approach was urgently desired. And this as a strong reaction and response to the dominant model for Worldview Education and Religious Education, the model of *knowledge acquirement*. In that model the emphasis has been laid on the transfer of content (perceived as a set of beliefs and norms) of cultural and religious sources.

In our countermodel the designers stress the activation of both mental, social and cultural capacities of learners in a free-space, a playroom for dialogue, critical thinking and co-creative acting. A model with the aim to discover meaning and sense to ambivalent life events and to existential and societal questions that bothers vulnerable human beings as sense seeking subjects.

Proven concepts and practices in this approach

The process of giving meaning in Life Orientation we discovered as a three level process, indicated with the signal words ***C****o creative*, ***I****nterpretive* and ***C****o reflective* [**CIC**]. All off these three layers are focused at sense discovery. The first level, the co-creative one, is embedded in the creation process of new educational practices, in a social interactive learning and development space. The second, the interpretive level, is embedded in the ongoing process of dialogue, role play and narration by which the actors make sense and meaning to their activities by interpretation. The third, the co-reflective level, is aimed at the process of creating new ideas and insights by questioning, associations, critical thinking and Socratic dialogue in order to produce new knowledge about the socio-cultural issue at stake.

An overall sensitizing concept we are designing is the concept of *Sense Discovery,* that overarches all the three levels. This concept is based on the work of Karl Weick, *Sense Making in Organizations* (Weick, 1995). This was in the nineties a radical new approach in Organization Theory, end in my view it still is.

There exists in Judaism an old tradition of creative and inventive interpretation of source narratives, the tradition of the *midrasj*. *Midrasj* is a Hebrew word for an open and curious way of exploring and interpreting source narratives in a living tradition in order to find new meanings and interpretations that open up a new perspective for acting out in actual life dilemmas and life questions. An open and curious mind is in this approach a precondition for creating such a room for play in order to discover sense.

The sensitizing concepts of creation, imagination, interaction, interpretation and reflection, under the umbrella of the overarching concept of sense making helped us to construct a conceptual framework by which we could design customized scenarios for Life Orientation in different educational contexts and for a variety of target audiences. It was remarkable in the designs of programs we developed in the last twenty years, that the physical presence of every participant is the base for the whole process of meaning making and sense making.

So we designed for each experiment a customized program challenging participants to response with all their capabilities (physical, social, moral, spiritual) at the different steps in the program. That means for the session with the principals of Australian primary schools, the first experiment, we used the building blocks *drama/role play* (creation), *dialogue* (interaction) *narratives* (interpretation, imagination) *associations* (reflection) and *sense discovery*.

1. The experiment with the Australian Principals of Catholic Primary Schools

This practice has been developed in the context of a program of the faculty of interreligious learning and theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. This faculty had invited a group of Australian principals of catholic primary schools for a versatile encounter with Dutch primary schools, in the context of the post-secular society. Together with the supervisors of the faculty they searched in the Dutch education system for signals of a new approach of worldview education in the area of tension between secularity and new forms of spirituality.

Now they experienced in the Dutch context a comparable area of tension between secularity and religiosity as in the Australian life environment. And they experienced this tension with all their capacities: physical, social, moral, existential and spiritual. In this dynamic context we were invited to conduct a bibliodrama program with this group of 17 principals at the end of their visit (2 October 2019) in a room of the Free University. In agreement with prof. M. Moyaert we designed a program for this afternoon adapted to their experiences , and as source narrative to mirror the experiences we choose for the rich *story of Ruth*, a novel of the Hebrew Bible. Probably a dialogue with such a human source narrative might inspire their personal and communal spiritual life orientation. Secondly, one of the existential themes in this source narrative is, or the Moabite women Ruth, Orpah, daughters in law from Naomi, a Jewish woman from Bethlehem in Judah, should and could go with her mother in law to Israel or not, after years of sojourning in Moab. What they had to leave behind them and what they would find in a strange and unknown land? Two worlds come together in the story and in the lies of the principals: what would happen?

As bibliodrama supervisors we accompanied the process in the group in their exploration of this narrative and we focused on the authentic but mixed experiences of these 17 principals, coming from their socio-cultural context and immersed in a different social, societal and spiritual life context and in that confrontation also with a unknown cultural source narrative out of an Eastern culture of centuries ago. This clash of contexts led to confusion and to clarification both in relation to the existential, social and spiritual quest of these principals for Life Orientation rooted in the specific context of their schools.

In the time slot of three hours we invited them to experience with body, soul and mind the specific dynamics of such a source narrative, by immersion in the landscape of the narrative and by role taking one of the three main characters in the first chapter of the novel of Ruth. They met each other in a totally different way, and communicated with all their senses with each other in a ludic atmosphere, with the consequences that they perceived each other as a person and as a principal with other eyes. In the exploration of the role of Orpah participants experienced glimpses of the inner struggle of her to return to their own Moabite family or to join her sister in law Ruth going to a strange land Judah. Some ‘Orpah’s’ viewed for the first time to this main character and experienced the worth of her choice to go back to Moab. Participants who had chosen for the role of Ruth, experienced the pain and the stress it gives in relation to your background culture, when she decided to attach her mother in law Naomi. For both daughters in law there is a mental and a social clash between two rivalry cultural and religious identities. They also have the burden of the loss of her Jewish husbands. This fate they dealt with Naomi who lost her husband in a foreign country and has to return to her homeland with a heavy burden.

The seventeen principals played their roles gracious and with a lot of pleasure identified themselves in their role taking, stimulated by different dramatic instruments, like making tableaux (frozen photographs of scenes), making drawings to express their link with the landscape of Moab and another one for the landscape of Judah. They wrote episodes in their diary in their role and shared their writings with other colleagues, and they played with three of them just the moment of the farewell to Orpah, returning to her family, and the journey of Ruth and Naomi together to another country; for the one new and strange, for the other returning to her homeland with pain in the heart. Real life themes passed by in the bibliodrama process, that touched the participants in heart, body and soul, like the theme: to which group you belong, or the question how to deal with the tragedy’s in one’s life and how to keep hope in a situation of deep grieve.

One of the questions posed on stage when the intensive dialogue was there was: *What in the experience and exploration of the role in the bibliodrama process touched your personal life experience?* It was amazing that three of the participants had the guts to share a personal life story evoked by the bibliodrama process. These stories told about life situations in which they had to find their way out in vulnerable situations.

*Reflection on action*

The principals of the Australian primary schools had a very exciting afternoon, experiencing the impact of physically and mentally drama exercises, combined with deep dialogues and attentive reflections. In all the visits they had brought to schools and training colleges, and in all the meetings they had, their brains, cognitive knowledge and social skills were addressed, but not so much the physical, emotional, moral and spiritual dimensions of their experiences. So when we started that particular afternoon by making together a play aera for interaction, imagination and co-association with body and soul, heart and mind, we triggered these professionals in their comfort zone.

We opened up in that session three worlds at the same time: the dynamics of the life world of the participants (both their inner mental world, the social world between them), the confrontation of the societal world in Australia and in the Netherlands with which they are connected) and the dynamics of the world of the source narrative of Ruth (with also an inner world of the characters, the social world between them and the broader societal world of that time). During the afternoon we stimulated the principals to explore with all their capabilities the three the moments these worlds clashed and rubbed.

As supervisors we noticed the discomfort of participants in performing some drama exercises like making a *tableau* (a frozen photo of a practical situation). But performing it again with the awareness that this inconvenience was also part of the others involved in the exercise, most of them broke through the discomfort and discovered sometimes another side or level of a character. Such an encounter shouldn’t be reached with a more cognitive and individual approach. In this experiment we activated at the same time their physical, imaginative, interactive capacities. The physical awareness of everyone in the play area and a feeling of pleasure and playfulness is a presupposition to be more sensitively and creatively involved into the life situation.

These varied holistic approach of presenting life issues in the context of the schools from the perspective of professionals in a confrontation with the world of an unknown source narrative about migration and integration of foreigners in the own mixed religious and secular community produced new ideas, new feelings and a new awareness what it means to be and to become a self-conscious human being in a society longing for justice with space for everyone. The stories these principals shared with each other, the dialogues they held, the reflections on their ludic interactions, the engagement through all the actions of their imagination and of their moral sensitivity, all these ways of learning from each other and from cultural sources, created an in between play area in which and through which they could discover sense to life themes and life questions. Many of them got a different view of their colleague, and also a different view of themselves.

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