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Why humour matters in Active Listening ?

An intercultural approach to conflict transformation

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1. Creative Conflict Management as a remedy to "banal cosmopolitanism."

In the past fifteen years I have been working at an approach to teaching conflict transformation which consists in fostering a double revolution. First, we should recognize that some form of creative conflict management is necessary in any successful intercultural communication; and second, that an intercultural approach is necessary in dealing with conflicts that are called "intractable" .

In other words I advocate *a conflict transformation approach to intercultural communication* and *an intercultural approach in conflict transformation processes*.

This position can be further articulated in two connected statements:

A. If we want to understand the dynamics of a good communication, we must ***take a successful intercultural communication as a point of departure.***

This statement picks up an experience that is becoming paramount in postmodern world: i.e. intercultural communication is the rule, intracultural communication can be seen as its simplification. The sociologist Ulrich Beck calls it "banal cosmopolitanism" of everyday life, and what we need to do is *upgrading* the epistemology of *emotions* and *thinking* to this level of complexity of everyday life's experience.

B. The second statement is an advice: to deal successfully with conflicts that seem intractable, treat them ***as if they were intercultural*** (and you will discover that they are).

Because of the increasing fragmentation, change and interdependence of social life more and more often the advice that parents should treat their children as belonging to another culture does not sound strange any more, it makes perfectly sense. The same is true for any kind of power relationship: teachers and students, administrators and citizens etc.

More and more often we find *intracultural* conflicts that are more *intercultural* than a lot of *intercultural* conflicts. (Think of a conflict with a mother in law, which not by chance so often becomes the object of quips, caricatures and jokes, and you are already in presence of a typical intra/intercultural conflict. That is: a conflict that only if approached with an anthropological, intercultural eye, can be transformed, perhaps, in a way that both parties may judge fairly positive)

2. The parable of the wise judge.

As we all know, Active Listening (AL) is the very foundation of any Creative Conflict Management (CCM) process. To teach AL is not easy. In these fifteen years I have been constantly trying to create some devices, stratagems, tricks and analytic toys to transmit and fix the complexity and counter-intuitivity of the moves and dances that are at the hearth of AL. One of these devices is called "The Seven Rules of the Art of Listening", another one is "The Magic Triangle of Art of Listening/Observing". Another is called "Parallel narrations" and consists in learning to tell the same story of a cultural incident in three ways (active-listening, ethnocentric and "neutral") and reflecting upon the differences.

But, given that in the post-modern society "complexity" and "interculturality" are overlapping concepts, I found that the most effective starting point, and also the one that immediately brings in *why and how* humor matters in AL, is the parable of the wise judge.

Here is how the story goes: two litigants bring their case before a judge who listens to the first litigant with serious and considered attention before delivering his verdict: "You are right." He then listens to the second with the same considered attention and pronounces: "You are right." Someone from the gallery stands up and objects. "Your honor, how can they both be right?" The judge pauses for a minute before responding, "And you too are right."

One of the more fundamental changes in modern society (actually *the change* responsible for the passage from first to second modernity) *concerns the dynamics of communication*, and is a consequence of the growing social fragmentation coupled with a deepening sense of communal interdependence. In this context, the parable of the wise judge, is not just an amusing anecdote but a very real reflection of the structural dynamics underlying any successful communication.

Two fundamental concepts originating with the anthropologist and epistemologist Gregory Bateson, are essential in this respect: "frames" and "deuterolearning". They both refer to arcs or sets of alternatives from which choices can be made. All of us take for granted these sets of possibilities and remain unconscious/unaware of them, but they nevertheless condition and shape our behavior. From a phenomenological point of view, changing such sets of alternatives corresponds to stepping out of the frames of reference which are part of us and of our way of seeing and acting. "Deuterolearning" (or learning to learn, or learning in the second or third degree) corresponds to the *savoir faire* we employ when we manage to confront these systemic and self-referential changes successfully.

To become a good listener/ observer, in this complex world, we must know how to recognize the difference between changing a point of view from within an assumed set of alternatives, or frame, and changing the frame itself. Moving inside a taken for granted frame or stepping out of it. Those simplifications that cause one to ignore the possibility of another's differences (the different, implicit premises which we both take for granted) create a crisis in the dynamics of

establishing open communication and common ground. The connections between the forms of understanding and the modalities of co-habitation, and hence between knowledge and creative conflict management (as studied, for instance, by scholars as diverse as Georg Simmel and Martin Buber, Gregory Bateson and Mikhail Bakhtin, Kurt Lewin and Chris Argyris whose concept of "double-loop learning" is very similar to deuterio-learning), thus become explicit, problematic and intrinsic to both communication and comprehension.

The ability to change deeply rooted habits of perception-evaluation require a sense of humor and poetry and an acute sensitivity to "the pertinence of context to meaning" and in the Western world it is seen as a kind of skillfulness and competence that is artistic rather than "scientific". Because these abilities are not reducible to a rational or to a technical habit of thought, in the past we had a tendency to abandon attempts to explain them, and consequently for instance the social sciences avoided investigating their formal dynamics, which relate to change, culture and identity. It is mainly thanks to the young and transdisciplinary field of Alternative Dispute Transformation (or creative conflict management) studies that things are beginning to change. Now we are getting almost ready to ask the fatal question: how much of what in the past was called "scientific approach" was a way to disguise the embarrassment of a parochial and ethnocentric scholar who didn't know how to deal with alterity ?

3. Listening : from empathy to exotopy.

Among the "Seven rules of the art of listening" (Sclavi, 2003) listed below¹, the one that best conveys the idea of what I mean by active listening is the following: "In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that he/she is right and ask him/her to help you understand why it is so. " "Active listening", as I define and teach it, involves a shift away from the "correct-mistaken", "I'm right, you're wrong", "friend-foe" attitude to a frame of mind in which you assume the other person is *intelligent*.

Most authors put forward a different, lighter definition, one where you must not assume that the other (with whom you disagree or whose behavior you dislike or find offensive) is intelligent,

¹ Seven Rules of the Art of Listening (by Marianella Sclavi)

1. Never be in a hurry to reach conclusions. Conclusions are the most ephemeral part of your research.
2. What you are seeing depends on your point of view. In order to see your point of view, you have to change it.
3. In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that he/she is right and ask him/her to help you to understand why it is.
4. The emotions are basic tools of knowledge if you understand that they speak a language of analogies and relationships. They don't tell you what you are looking at, but how you are looking at it.
5. A good listener is an explorer of possible worlds. The signals which he or she finds most important are the ones that seem both negligible and annoying, both marginal and irritating, since they refuse to mesh with previous convictions and certainties.
6. A good listener is happy to accept the self-contradictions that come to the fore in personal thoughts and interpersonal communications. Misunderstandings are accepted as occasions for entering the most exciting field of all: the creative management of conflicts.
7. To become an expert in listening you must follow a humorous methodology. But when you have learned how to listen, it is humor that will follow you.

is right, but only that what she says "makes sense". Paraphrasing Clifford Geerts' distinction between thin and thick description, we might talk of two schools of thought about active listening : the *thin* AL and the *thick* AL schools. The first one is mainly based upon empathy. The second requires to transcend empathy and get to exotopy or extralocality (Bakhtin and Todorov).

Empathy is OK when you are in a position similar to that of a person who is in control of the situation, the specimen is an interviewer who was trained to react with a benevolent attitude, curiosity and respect to another persons' opinions and behaviors that he might privately judge negatively. Exotopy is OK when you are part of a conflict, you are offended and angry and you decide that instead of reacting with a punch in the nose, you are going to act in a way that apparently is absurd: you are going to be at the same time angry and sympathetic, and try to place yourself under those conditions that will allow you to understand why behaviors and actions that seem unreasonable and irrational to you are perfectly reasonable and rational from the other person's perspective (See Rules n° 2 and 6 of the Seven). In other words exotopy requires a *double displacement: you displace yourself in order to be able to displace the interlocutor*. You and the interlocutor are both ready for a fight or flight reaction and the double displacement is aimed at creating a situation of reciprocal recognition and respect, a context for a metacommunication of the kind illustrated by the parable of the wise judge. A meta-communication of the kind: "I am right, and you are right too (although you say the opposite) and at the same time and on equal footing, we cannot be both right because we are not able to understand each other, nor to collaborate in creating a common ground."

Now, if you have in mind that communication happens always at three levels and with three forms of languages (three codes): verbal, body and emotional, the movement of double displacement corresponds to the gentle elaboration of a (lighter or deeper) trauma. In a complex world it is crucial to know how to deal in a gentle, light, creative and playful way with displacements, cultural shocks, cognitive dissonances which are important aspects of what we usually refer to as "plain interest conflicts".

4. Listening and Interculturality

Good intercultural communication in concrete, contingent situations (Sclavi, 2003, 2005) provides the most effective illustration of the difference between thin and thick active listening because it makes it easier to understand three aspects of any complex communication: 1. that an identical behavior pattern may have antithetical and at the same time absolutely legitimate meanings. For example, looking an authority figure in the eye may be a mark of respect in one culture and a lack of respect in another. 2. that empathy may not be enough in seeking to understand the experience of the other person. Understanding here requires stepping out of the taken for granted cultural frames, to see as important aspects we are accustomed to regard as negligible or had never previously taken into consideration 3. that misunderstandings, frustration, embarrassment and conflict are intrinsic to communication and the main problem is not to avoid

them, but to transform them into opportunities for reciprocal deuterolearning.

In general the correct attitude to adopt as an active listener (both thin and thick) is the direct opposite of what is conventionally expected on the part of a good observer: impassive, neutral, self-assured, heedless of his own emotions and ready to conceal or ignore his own reactions to what he hears. But in intercultural communication it is easier to understand that to get things into perspective, we need to learn something new and surprising, something that pushes us out of our "certainties" and enables us to view things in a way not previously foreseen. We must be prepared to feel "awkward", to recognize that we find absurd or thoroughly ridiculous and nonsense what the other person is saying and/or doing. Displacement becomes a necessary step to establish the mutual recognition, respect and learning required for the joint and creative solution to a problem. The arrogance of the know-it-all is replaced by an acceptance of vulnerability, together with the pleasure that comes from being someone who learns and grows, who changes with others instead of opposing them.

An intercultural dialogue is not primarily concerned with behavioral patterns, but with perceptive and evaluative habits that are ingrained and very difficult to change.

5. Two habits of thought.

Systematically teaching and learning the art of listening is made particularly difficult by two types of obstacle.

First, every culture inevitably tends to inculcate into its members a form of ethnocentrism. Each culture presents its own point of view and set of alternatives as unique and best. Second, Western culture promotes an attitude that equates "context blindness" with the engine of progress. In such a context, anyone who wishes to produce a sound, authoritative description of an event spontaneously relies upon a criteria of "objectivity-subjectivity," which are in fact valid only when the larger context can be taken for granted, but which are the opposite of the criteria and dynamics one needs to adopt when the contexts themselves are to be explored. The point then is not to supplant the dominant habit of thought, which is perfectly adequate when the context is simple and the implicit premises can be taken for granted. Instead, we need to supplement it with a second and more complex habit of thought. But these two different habits of thought are not at the same level: the transition from the complex to the simple is relatively smooth, because it boils down to a reduction of frames of reference. On the other hand, the transition from the simpler habit of thought to the complex appears to the actors as absurd, since it seems to involve a transition to an incompatible dimension. From this standpoint, it is much easier to move toward the simple (the reduction of frames), while if we start from a simple we get to the complicated (the multiplication of variables) rather than to the complex.

The usual approach must therefore be turned upside down: we must begin with the complex in order to understand the simple.

When we move within a "simple system" (shared frames of reference, the same assumed premises), the most appropriate habit of thought is that of classical logic—analytical and linear reasoning *plus* empathy . But when the system is "complex" (characterized by communication between different frames of reference), one needs a different habit of thought, one guided by thick active listening (exotopy), which considers the observer as an integral part of what is being observed, both circularly and self-reflectively. The diversification of society is making active listening an ever more essential basic skill, a skill that is likewise indispensable within the compass of the "same culture" .

The two tables set out below (Sclavi, 2002 , 2003) summarize the main differences between the two "habits of thought:"

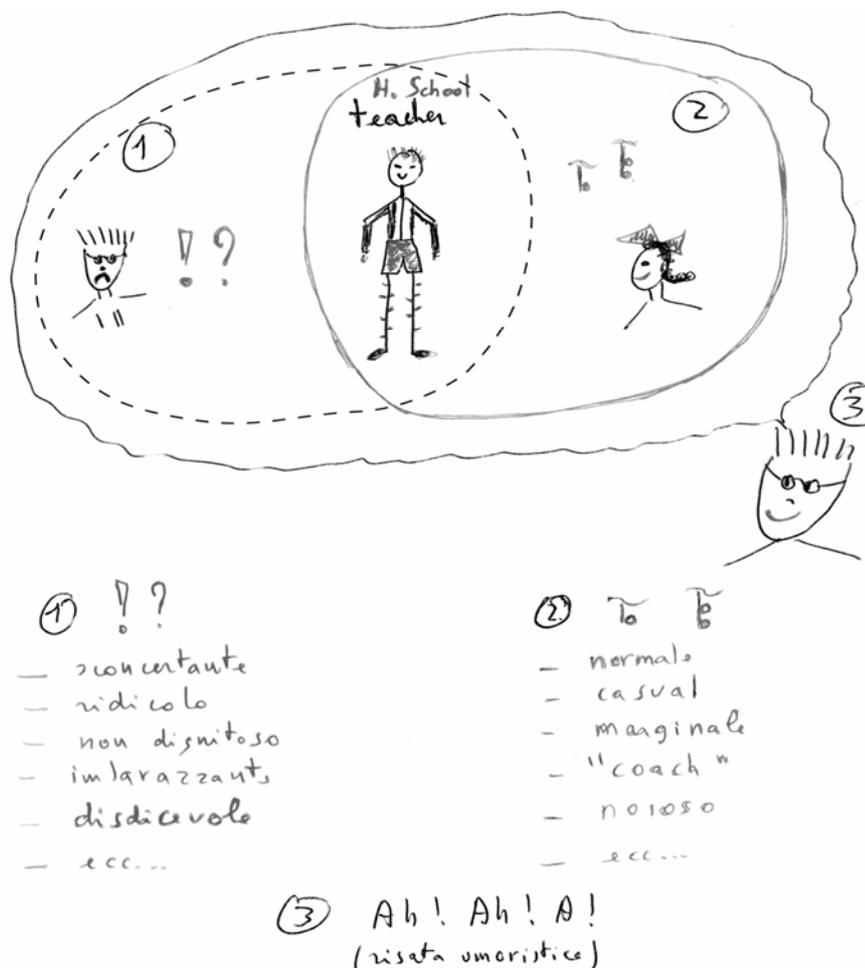
Table: " Two habits of thought"

Simple system (Empathy, thin AL)	Complex systems (Exotopy, thick AL)
The "same things" have the same meaning	The "same things" have different meanings
Same implicit premises (frames of reference).	Different implicit premises (frames of reference).
What we take for granted helps us to communicate	What we take for granted prevents us from communicating
I'm right, you're wrong (and vice versa) not everyone can be right	Everyone is right, even the person who saysnot everyone can be right
First-degree control (ability to foresee the range of possible expected reactions)	Second-degree control (ability to transform the unexpected reactions into knowledge)
Mono-cultural world	Pluri-cultural world
Uni/verse	Pluri/verse

6. The Humoristic Chronotope.

The initial point, of course, is Gestalt psychology: what we see depends on our point of view; to see our point of view, we must change it. But spatiality in cognitive studies is seen as a disembodied abstract dimension and mental faculty. The humoristic chronotope is displacement with a body and emotions, not only as a conceptual sudden switch; spatiality is seen as the result of social systems of contingency cooperatively learned. Thus displacement becomes more similar to a step of a dance, a passo -doble, perhaps. Here is how it works.

In the halls of Crying Wolf (the name I gave to the American High School) I see a teacher of social studies wearing shorts and a sport shirt ².



² In the second half of the 80s' I did a field research based on writing the parallel stories of a day of school in a very good Public High School in Italy and in the Usa . Each day was seen through the eyes of what is taken for granted in the other (often opposite) context. See : Scavi 2005

Phase 1. My reaction as a former student, teacher and mother in an Italian School: astonishment, a certain uneasiness, a feeling of alarm over a slight to professional dignity. I imagine the students' reactions: laughter and ironic comments

Phase 2. I look around me. Unlike myself, Chloe (the American student I am shadowing) and the other students are quite relaxed, they greet the teacher in a friendly, slightly protective way, without counting the hairs on his legs. They are orderly, even bored, in short: normal. I deduce that: a) the "same action", a teacher entering in a classroom in shorts, has different meanings in the two different backgrounds and b) the meaning of "authority" in connection with teaching, is different.

Phase 3. I laugh at myself for having let myself be flattened by imagery from my own culture. But I am also glad that this incident occurred.

Only by listening intently to the voice of our own culture can we draw a map of the differences between two cultural backgrounds. And only while drawing this map do we find by what systematic presences and exclusions, the feeling of "obviousness" and "inevitability" of certain ways of seeing is socially constructed.

In the above drawing every circle represents a phase of observation and at the same time a different way of seeing the same social event:

Circles 1 and 2 correspond to two frames of reference which appear to be mutually exclusive. In one a certain behavior seems laughable, in the other normal and respectable. The overlapping of the two, their presenting themselves as equally legitimate, makes for a feeling of bewilderment, of indignation, suspended laughter and even doubt as to our own identity.

This dynamic of overlapping, known as *bisociation*³, is not obligatory. It can be avoided by assuming our point of view as unobjectionable and assuming ourselves as unobjectionable. Or else we can perceive the event as a problem *for us* and we can laugh or worry at the resulting bisociation. Finally we may adopt the attitude that I call "humoristic" and which corresponds to phase 3.

Let us see, now how this same mechanism applies to the dynamics underlying a common witticism. Freud (1905) gives us a splendid example, taken from a story by Heine about:

a poor lottery-agent who boasts to his friends that the great Baron Rothschild had treated him quite as his equal, quite famillionairely!

The last word sets in motion a mechanism which Freud describes as follows:

Phase 1 *Bewilderment (and annoyance)* before what at first appears only as a wrongly constructed word: unintelligible, puzzling.

Phase 2 *First Illumination*, with a sudden mental jolt we understand the hidden meaning of the new word and the ingenuity of its construction

³ In the '70s a succession of contributions including two by R. Johnson (1975 and 1976) in the Review *Semeiotica* and an essay by T Todorov in his book *Theories du Symbol* (1977) showed that the theories of humor elaborated at the beginning of the century by Freud, Bergson and later by A Koestler, G Bateson, W Fry, M. Douglas, have in common a

Phase 3 *Second Illumination*, in which we realize that something very small, such as a word meaningless in normal usage, has got us into trouble.

This second illumination is the one characteristic of a humoristic attitude in contrast with one marked by a purely comic, hilarious frame of mind. When we laugh humorously we laugh mainly at ourselves, at our former rigidity. We realize that we have let ourselves be hypnotized by one of the many possible ways of ordering events.

What I have called a "humoristic style of observation" is nothing but the application to daily life of the same three phases, in the same order, which characterize the understanding of a witticism.

For this type of observation to function we must set out with a certain lightheartedness, much curiosity and a first hand acquaintance (by "full immersion") with the social problems which we want to study. And of course we must be wary of misteps. Not to avoid them, on the contrary, to observe them with special care: in a humoristic perspective they are the highway to understanding.

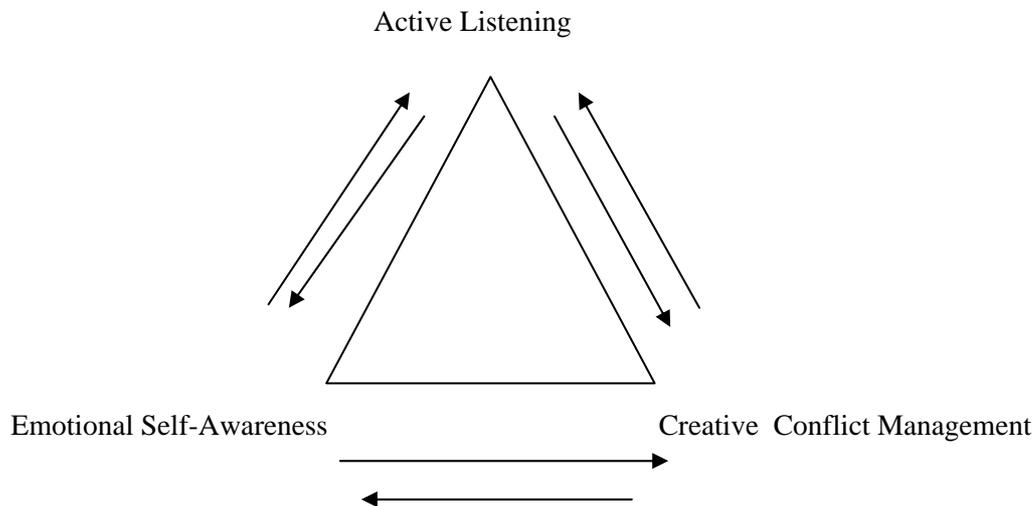
7. The Magic Triangle: the "emotions are steps of a dance" approach.

If emotions are informations about being in the middle of a process of frame-construction, we can say that emotional self-awareness depends upon how much *dislocation* is praised in the larger fields of possibilities we belong to and thus on how much we are trained in accepting and provoking it.

To be open to dislocation, even to look for it, it is a central feature of emotional self-awareness.

An important implication is that *we as individuals are not* our automatic emotional reactions; we are the kind of dialog that we establish with our affects and the style with which we deal with them. We are metacommunications about metacommunications. If in a society where envy is the rule we do not feel in first instance envy when a colleague gets a reward, we are not in a position to really understand that society's culture or subculture. What a person "not envious" does is recognizing immediately that her body is embarking in that dance, acknowledge that it is a reaction which is often present and always possible in that society (it is the "paradigmatic reaction"), but not the one which she chooses to bring forth. And she masters the *savoir faire* of felicitous changes of dance; which are based on a "this is a play" frame and a "humoristic" interpretation of what is going on.

I call the following figure the "magic triangle of the art of listening." It reveals the interconnections between active listening, emotional self-awareness and the creative management of conflicts. These are the three dimensions of a non-reductionist and competent communication, a communication that involves an awareness of the importance of our respective frames of reference and the *savoir faire* needed to change these frames.



The triangle indicates that training in "active listening" is a complex process that involves the other two dimensions; and reciprocally, that competence in emotional self-awareness is impossible without practicing active listening and the creative management of conflicts, while the creative management of conflicts itself depends on active listening and emotional self-awareness.

I agree with Ulrich Beck (2005) when he maintains that a full cosmopolitan sensitivity and competence is born *from a clash of cultures within one's own life*. In a very precise sense, a good observer is also always an "ethnographer", because like a good anthropologist, she is conscious of the importance of the intercultural dynamics in communication and understanding.

Effective observation does not deal only with the differences in behavior, but with the circular processes and the dynamics of interdependence and mutual coordination. These processes lead to the construction and transformation of mutually possible and common worlds. The good observer acts in a relational and reflexive environment in which she is part of what is being observed.

Given this holistic, circular and self-referential approach, the complex relations forming the magic triangle represent the tempestuous seas in which, willy nilly, we must learn to swim.

These relations can also be expressed in terms of three "psycho-anthropological equations:

Active listening = emotional self-awareness + creative conflict management

Emotional self-awareness = active listening + creative conflict management

Creative conflict management = active listening + emotional self-awareness

The more complex the environment, the more likely communication occurs in situations in which "the same things and same events" take on different and incompatible meanings. Therefore, the more complex the environment is, the more its authors need to develop the special savoir faire of systemic reflexivity. They need to feel at home with an epistemology in which a central role is played by paradoxes, the circularity of communication, polyphony, dialogical comprehension and the art of listening. Such an epistemology therefore requires flexibility, humor, simultaneous involvement and detachment, and active listening. An environment in which these elements are lacking becomes a mad-house. It produces anxiety, neurosis, psychosis and schismogenesis (the escalation of conflict), and it ultimately becomes turbulent and uncontrollable. Blindness and a lack of sensitivity to contexts, an inability to appreciate the "pertinence of context to meaning", is catastrophic in a complex environment. This is the hubris of Western culture, and we need to do away with it.

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