



CULTURAL EDUCATION IN EUROPE


SIMILARITIES BEYOND DIFFERENCES

“Culture is Like Oxygen,” reads the slogan of the Małopolska Institute of Culture (MIK), the organizer of the Krakow conference as part of the European Network of Observatories in the field of Arts and Cultural Education (ENO), held on 22 March 2018. This phrase is, of course, not only addressed to people in the culture industry, though when problematized it can be shown to hold many pitfalls, as the conference discussion demonstrated all too well.

The first of these pitfalls, or rather challenges we should address is the scope of the term “culture,” for on this hinges our further understanding and definition of the field of education. Are we investigating cultural education, i.e. the preparation for competent participation in legitimized cultural practices, or a cultured education, i.e. the preparation for the active practice of culture as a living environment that goes beyond legitimized practices?

In the Polish debate on culture, the distinction between participation in culture and education is of increasing significance, as MIK director Joanna Orlik pointed out in her inaugural speech for the discussion. This is because it allows us to consider phenomena in programming “education for culture” (a notion I will be using to avoid taking a stance in terms of definitions) that cultural theorists and cultural sociologists describe as an “expanded field of culture” (cultural and creative acts developed outside of recognized institutional structures) and “live culture” (culture as a symbolically mediated experience of life).

The Polish discussion on culture and cultured/cultural education is not, of course, unique, and is also found in other countries, such as France, where Frederic Mitterand, Minister of Culture during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency, returned to a question posed in the mid twentieth century by Andre Malraux to shape his vision of modern cultural policies: Should culture be for everyone, or for each one of us? Malraux solved this issue by appealing to a cultural policy that adhered to the principle of “culture for everyone,” acknowledging that everyone can participate in recognized cultural practices, and the path to this participation leads through proper cultural education.




Today, in our era of “democratization of culture” through digitization processes and profound changes in society, the question arises of the legitimacy of “culture for everyone,” defining both the aims of modern cultural policies and cultural education. The tension raised in Poland in the distinction between cultural and cultured education, and in France between visions of culture for everyone and for each one of us, was quite tangible during the Krakow conference, though it was not articulated out loud, as the main facet of the debate was the issue of “education for a multi-speed culture”: Are national experiences and education programs for culture comparable, or, in discussing them, ought we to take into account the differences arising from various historical experiences of the societies in the nations composing the European Union? Furthermore, are those differences an expression of cultural essentialisms that cannot be universalized through modernizing processes, or do they express the “backwardness” of societies like Poland, Latvia, Estonia, or more broadly speaking, the former Eastern Bloc?

This question was posed directly, prompting emotional responses and open discussion of fundamental significance for the discussion on education for culture. The question is to what extent education for culture should shape what makes a culture distinct and unique (such as the policy of nurturing national identity and cultivating a nation’s cultural heritage) and how far nurturing difference should be balanced by education for culture seen as universal aesthetic values, codes, and meanings, allowing us to communicate past our differences.

This tension is not abstract in nature, as we could see from the debate initiating the Krakow conference. Its aim was to show the meeting’s participants a Polish cultural perspective, marked by quite specific historical experiences. These have led to the rise of a very strong Romantic paradigm in the culture, which, combined with a Messianic mythology, gives a sacred aspect to history and its cultural, symbolic depictions for many Poles. This paradigm, though its demise through the universalizing forces of modernization has been forecast on many occasions (it was last made in 1989) continues to thrive, as shown by the present revival of right-wing populism and nationalism with its direct reference to Messianic mythology.

The power of the Romantic paradigm indeed causes the culture in Poland to be like the air we breathe, albeit poisoned by the miasma of irrational models for interpreting history and modern-day reality. As such, culture ceases to aid the Enlightenment Bildung process, to create an autonomous individual; it becomes an instrument for shaping a national consciousness and, in fact, propaganda, whose task is to legitimize present-day political projects.

The participants in the Polish panel analyzed how this Romantic paradigm endures, not only through its symbolic and narrative appeal, but also through systemic activities: teaching programs in the public education system, and operating strategies of programs of culture and art institutions, such as the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the Warsaw Rising Museum, and the Museum of John Paul II in Wadowice.



The conference discussion and presentation of experiences from Latvia and Estonia showed that the tension between Bildung and “nation building” is not specifically Polish, though the power of Messianism is particular to Poland. In all the societies deprived of statehood in the nineteenth century culture served a dual role: creating a national identity was part of the process of modernization, and education for culture shaped the ability to practice universal (read: European, Western) forms of culture, though mainly saturated with national, often mythologized substance.

All this means the past is significant, and we must not forget about it while discussing education for culture; the power to mold a social imagination has an impact on politics, which in turn affects the substance of cultural policy and expectations toward institutions that educate for culture and their programs. This, however, is only one aspect of the impact of the past on the present of education for culture. A second aspect comes from the durability of institutional solutions – much of the system and infrastructure of education for culture in countries like Poland or Estonia was built in the socialist era. This system survived the system transformation not only in material terms, but also in institutional values and practices. This durability has both good and bad sides. The good sides include the widespread institutions like culture centers and public libraries; the drawbacks include the frequent fossilization of organizations and programs.

The discussion about experience in education for culture in post-socialist societies displayed the fact that it cannot be seen as an axiologically neutral technocratic undertaking and defined as part of the neo-liberal “education for innovation and creativity” program. For even this aim, as Mari Martin of Finland showed, requires choices of an axiological nature. We make these choices when, like the Finns, we decide that the education for culture system should be based on accessibility, equality, diversity, involvement, and sustainable development.

The principles listed by Mari Martin were reiterated in various configurations by other conference participants, and might be taken as a joint foundation for the debate on education for culture in European culture. There were also shared and powerful convictions when it came to the place of education for culture in the education system: it must be part of an integrated education system, and not merely a separate subject. Interestingly enough, the postulate of education for culture as part of an integrated education program was first expressed in this conference by Jan Tomasz Adamus, an artist who heads Capella Cracoviensis.

Zoe Zernitz of Holland demonstrated that this postulate, however, could be rendered in several models (inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary). Each model requires different teacher competencies and resources (whose shortage is the main obstacle, as Dutch teachers stress). The matter of integration with the education system is complicated by methodological issues, but also by institutional barriers, mainly silo thinking, which impedes cooperation between various fields. Yet this is not all, as Susanne Keuchel of Germany noted;

in creating education for culture programs, regardless of the model, we must account for the challenges of the present. These mainly arise from the dynamic processes of social change, a key aspect of which is migration and digitization processes, which radically change the fields of culture and cultural practices.

In terms of education for culture, what is locally described as the “expanded field of culture,” wherein culture steps out beyond the recognized institutional framework, has a key effect. This process naturally incorporates education for culture, which should also pursue the real experience of contemporary participants in culture, and, increasingly, involve informal education outside of the cultural institution, and education for the real social space.

We might conclude this observation by postulating that we should always seek innovation in education for culture, acknowledging social changes while remaining within axiological frameworks. Importantly, in seeking these innovations, we should also rely on historical experience, which can be a source of sometimes unhealthy emotions, as we have described, but can also furnish helpful suggestions. One example is the Community House run in Estonia during the interwar period as an open space for being together through various, mainly cultural activities.

The conference provided plenty of important examples of specific innovations in education for culture, such as the Dutch program of integral education and the Polish Very Young Culture program. The core of the Polish project is deftly combining the attributes of the Polish structure (the multi-level division of competencies between the central, regional, and local authorities) into a system which both ensures diversity and encourages the cooperation of many subjects and sectors with axiological coherence and quality of content.

Despite the emotions stirred by the historical issues and the sincere questions on what makes the differences between European societies, the Krakow conference showed that profound differences, embracing history, heritage, and institutional inertia, can be a source of strength in seeking innovation in education for culture. The linear models of modernization are exhausted, but this does not mean the defeat of the Enlightenment notion of Bildung as an integrated process in shaping a person, part of which is education for culture. This idea does, however, need to be relegitimized in a contemporary and increasingly culturally diverse society. One method would seem to be the constant development of new forms of education for culture, taking into account transformations in civilization, while maintaining axiological coherence. The ability to learn from one another and exchange experiences from various historical and cultural contexts are especially significant in this process.

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