**BRIDGES ACROSS BOUNDARIES: the mutual gain of interconnected narratives**¹

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**WORKING PAPER**

**Beginning the story**

Three episodes in my personal experience as an education professional perhaps stand out for the ways in which the lessons learnt helped me to shape this project as it was originally proposed. Naturally, the work we have undertaken with our partners is helping to shape it as it actually is.

1. **The first: challenging the "grand narratives"...**

Some years ago I fostered and co-ordinated an international teacher exchange project involving about 30 secondary-school teachers in 4 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy and Sweden) in a "different-subject trade"². These teachers worked within a real and virtual cross-swap network teaching a module of another subject teacher's syllabus in a different country but in a common language. They did this, however, from the epistemological viewpoint of their own subject area and used varied teaching methods they had explored in their own professional practice. In each case, the deliberate and negotiated "incursion" into the other teacher's "domain" -- intended both culture-wise and subject-wise -- constituted a radically new learning experience for pupils and teachers alike and revealed the "resourceful space" of inter-relatedness and "interim worlds" (Neuner, 2002) that everyone involved could grow in. The project had no specific "centre" of operation and it challenged the set narratives of subject-teaching and learning in the schools involved, by having other "narrators" come in and tell a different story or tell the story differently, or enact a new story altogether with the pupils. These stories then required a different scenario and art of telling. Once back on home turf, no narrator could simply pick up where he/she had left off.

2. **... but relating to staples: the second**

I was once involved in a series of intercultural training workshops with lower-secondary school teachers needing to find ways to relate to the growing number of children in their classes from non-Italian ethnic backgrounds. The metaphor we decided to focus on in one of these workshops was food. Through a series of sense-oriented activities around a physical display of the starchy foods that constitute staples in the diets of many different peoples (types of rice, breads, tubers, pulses, etc...), these teachers were brought to explore and experience the cross-cultural bridging value of the metaphor. Staples carry a nutritional as well as ritual value the world over. They are "food" as well as "sign", "substance" as well as "myth", "figure" as well as "ground". They are cultural "cores", and these cores are no less dynamic and shifting for being so. In a classroom of different cultural and personal narratives that criss-cross one another in an "unstable web of significations" (Selden, 1989), the strain in sense-making for teacher and pupil alike may be eased by a collective focus on their need for "staples" -- the analogies that help to celebrate the differences within a common purpose: the priority of learning, and learning to belong through others. "The shortest route to learning about our own selves often takes the long way round -- through others", said one teacher at the end of the workshop.

¹ (ICSEI Barcelona, 5 January 2005 draft, with additions for Lugano SSRE Congress, 22 September 2005)  
² An Italian teacher of English Literature took the place of a Bulgarian teacher of Earth Sciences and Geography while the Bulgarian teacher of Earth Sciences and Geography went to Belgium to teach a module of History and Ethics, for instance.
3. The third: planting crabgrass

In the late spring of 2003, in putting the finishing touches to the Italian translation-adaptation of *Self-Evaluation in European Schools - A Story of Change*, I wondered whether all the learning condensed from the experiences of the 101 schools in the 18 pilot-project countries might not be shared more than it had been till then. There was now an English, a German, an Italian and a Polish version of the book, but there was a lot more ground to cover, in both geographical and intercultural terms. After discussing my ideas with John MacBeath, we set about looking for partners for a follow-up project. Almost all those we contacted responded enthusiastically to the proposal. Only one prospective partner replied that the original research project had been concluded some 4 years before and that the book documenting it could be found in many university libraries. To this scholar's mind, there appeared to be no need to go any further. "What is a powerful tool like this doing sitting in university libraries, instead of being out there in schools, where it can do the most good?" I couldn't help musing. (The European Commission is not the only one to notice that the weak link in many good research projects it finances lies precisely in dissemination -- the type and range of dissemination that can challenge practice...).

I thought of the crabgrass that had taken over the courtyard at home, with its rhizomatic, horizontal way of spreading. Rather than having only one root as most plants, it has millions of rhizomes, none of which are central, each shooting off and interconnecting at random. Nodes interconnecting with other nodes that rearrange interconnections saying "and, and, and, ...": I thought of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of knowledge being created that way (1980). I thought of the Internet. Could a book with rhizomes in various languages and cultures planted in that "resourceful space" of classrooms, schools and homes contribute to inter-relate these classrooms, schools and homes in a dialogue over what is "staple" to them? And could this be achieved by fostering in each the rolling out of its own story of change, recounted with its own voice and cast in the varying cultural and conceptual settings that other classrooms, schools and homes might relate to? These "discursive spaces" rely on a "textuality" that necessarily must take the national and international "grand narratives" of school effectiveness and improvement into account, but not to replicate them. Readers bring to their reading their own "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) that may make of any narrative a new "resourceful space", an "interim world" in which borders, frontiers and boundaries lose their sense of *finis* to become "openings, doors and windows" (Raasch, 2002) of discovery and self-discovery. The ways in which these "discursive spaces" are laid out through language and other means of communication -- icon, index or symbol, as is the case -- must aid this transformation.

A tree is a tree is a tree?

*Figure 1: "Draw a tree" (2 trees drawn by 19 and 6 students all of German origin, respectively; a palm tree drawn by a Maroccan student, a papyrus? tree drawn by a Chinese student, an olive tree? drawn by a Greek student in an international class)*

(Neuner, 2003)

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Unsurprisingly, we notice that the pictures of a "tree" drawn by the students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds reflect their experiences of their own environment, but it is also interesting to note that the German students had at least two different images of a "tree" in their minds.

This is an old game learnt from the founders of semiotics (Pierce, Ogden and Richards, de Saussure) in the early part of the last century. One may attempt a similar game with "accountability" (MacBeath and McGlynn, 2002). But old games may be put to new uses to challenge and deconstruct our "metanarratives" or "grand narratives" (Lyotard, 1979), laying bare the problematic nature of all "centres" (Derrida). Although we need narratives as "staples", it is important to remind ourselves of whose narratives these are.

Much of the discourse produced in these years on school effectiveness and improvement is coming through the medium of English and it is not uncommon to see people of different education-culture backgrounds trying to grapple and come to terms with this discourse in wishing to relate the innovation conveyed through it to their own cultural backgrounds. The diffusion and dissemination of "good" and "best practice" rely heavily on this principle. However, in trying to transpose such ideas and practices from the English-speaking research and cultural milieus to other language and cultural contexts, it is not simply an issue of "laundring" English discourse on the matter to get out the cultural markers before adding on new ones. As was emphasized in the recent British Council Going Global conference on international education (Edinburgh, 8-10 December 2004), the only sustainable way in which to pursue the UN's Millenium Development Goals, aiming at a massive uptake in human learning on a global scale, will come through partnership models of negotiation of meanings and curation of knowledge. As Sir John Daniel reminded everyone there, "the most difficult bridge to cross is the last mile to the individual farmer". In our own setting, we may substitute "learner" or "school" for "farmer" in Sir John's words. The "most difficult bridge" leads to helping learners and schools in different cultures identify their own needs and take on a dialogue about them, both on "their" side of the bridge and with the "other", in terms that are relevant and meaningful for both, each in their own realities.

Nine Serenas

In writing the original story of Serena in English in Self-Evaluation in European Schools, John MacBeath and his co-authors envisaged Serena, her family and her teachers as not being "located in any identifiable school or country. Their school is, in some respects, 'every school' and her home and community life 'anywhere'." (MacBeath et al, 2000). One can recognize in this aim the attempt to come to grips with the "staples" of school development experiences in 18 European countries.

However, in my own endeavour to make Serena's story a "last-mile-bridge" story that would help individual Italian practitioners, students and families want to start composing their own narratives about bettering life at school, or that would sustain them in such efforts, I realized that many of the concepts from school effectiveness and improvement literature woven into the fabric of the book had no bridgeheads on this side of the valley. Moreover, although the apparent "neutrality" of the "every school" flavour of the narrative, like in the medieval Morality plays, was meant to make it transferable to and evocative of any education culture, at the same time the story was embedded in social, educational and cultural processes and practices that are meaningful to the world of dominant English-speaking discourse. Its "vanilla" flavour tasted like "vanilla". Thus, the "new" Serena could not be a clone, even more so if there were to be five more by the end of the project (in Czech, Greek, Hungarian, Portuguese and Slovak), in addition to the four already existing.
Learning from the nine Serenas

However, the translation/adaptation process that ensued for the existing versions, and is under way at the moment for the others, has also raised questions of a more general nature concerning the ways in which many of the concepts developed within the school effectiveness and improvement paradigms in the English-using world "migrate" into other linguistic and education-culture settings.

Just as Eskimo has 32 different terms for the English "snow", unless it borrows terms such as "audit" directly from English the Italian word valutazione covers the entire paradigm of "evaluation", "assessment", "appraisal", "review", "stock-taking" and "audit". Monitoraggio is a recent entry, borrowed from "monitoring". This, of course, reveals something about the scope of the evaluation culture in Italy. Over and beyond considerations tied to their “digests of [educational] experience” and to “interlinguistic distance” (Castellotti and Moore, 2002), it has been a challenge as well for the Czech, Slovak and Hungarian translators to carry over the understanding of what “academic achievement” might entail other than their own “study results” (CZ and SK) or “fulfilment of curricular requirements” (HU). As Michael Schratz (2003) recalls, coming to grips with "leadership" is also far from easy in German (Führer has ominous overtones, as one might expect). And to cite a further example, to English speakers “stakeholders” might appear to have been diluted into varieties of “interested parties” in Portuguese, Italian and Greek. The translation/adaptation process of the book into an array of other languages thus constitutes a unique opportunity to reflect on how elements of the grand discourses of school effectiveness and improvement impact interculturally, at least on a European scale (Brotto, 2005).

If “science” may be seen in terms of a “conversation”, and the translators of the new versions of the Serena book represent “voices” of different “interpretive communities” (Czarniawska, 1997) interacting and negotiating meaning in the conversation, the discussion process by which they collectively become authors of the new Serena narratives may indeed shed light on a novel way to re-position our understanding of key concepts in English-using education discourse, possibly making us aware of our own “blind spots”.

For the time being, however, it seems that much of the discourse flow is moving from English-speaking or -using circles outwards to other languages, which attempt some sort of cultural appropriation of the concepts expressed (Figure 2).
Fortunately – one might add – a recent resurgent awareness of the dangers of oversimplification, ethnocentrism and taken-for-grantedness is starting to emerge especially among researchers acting outside the mainstream North-America, UK and Australia areas, as they highlight the “dilemmas of international transfer” (Crossley and Watson, 2003; Dimmock and Walker, 2005). Crossley and Watson make this particularly evident in recalling – over a century later – the “socio-cultural and interpretative perspective” that Michael Sadler, a pioneer in comparative and international educational research, advocated:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and picking off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. […]

(Saddler, 1900, cited in Crossley and Watson, 2003: 6)

This then brings other questions to mind, related to the pitfalls of centre-dominated discourses. Are we running more risks of some sort of "cultural imperialism" in this way? Can the arrows in the figure only point outwards, in an analogous way to the export of education services on a global scale, which flow from North to South while the brain-drain only seems to flow from South to North? What happens when elements of these grand discourses transmigrate into other cultures? What entrenched value systems do they take with them? What do they leave behind? What in these elements may constitute a "staple"? How can other cultures not lose their voices in engaging with the elements of the grand narratives of comparability? How can we share learning across cultures? What "resourceful spaces" and "interim worlds" can emerge in the process that will "valorise" the richness of local capital? Can the grand narratives stand to gain from these local "resourceful spaces"? Can the "grand" narratives stand to learn from the "little" ones? Are they interested in these stories? Are they able to look beyond themselves to, as John MacBeath says, "a different underlying set of premises or assumptions" (MacBeath, 2005)? Do they wish to do so?

It is difficult to position ourselves in the rhizomatic centreless discourses of interdependence, but we need to do so if we are to look to learning in terms of sustainability. If we were to conceive of one of the "wedges" in Figure 2 in a more interconnected way, then certainly the English-language narratives would lose some of their central feeder role and be also fed. Can the English language part of the "ethos wedge" fan out and gain in its understanding of what ethos is through what ethos represents or might represent in other cultures? (Figure 3). Can the "fanning out" of mutual gain take place throughout the "wedge"? Can the "wedge" become a "discursive space" of transformation for all? This is one of the important challenges the partners and translators have undertaken in the Bridges across Boundaries project.

What the nine versions of the story of Serena may unfold to us in their telling is little compared to the immense wealth of narratives harboured in the bosoms of learners and schools in the diverse corners of Europe. Notwithstanding, these nine inter-related rhizomatic versions may help these stories to be told, and listened to. And we believe we all stand to gain in the process of the telling. Crabgrass thrives when it rains.
Figure 3: the mutual gain of interconnected narratives

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References


