

Reflexions on the piloting of *The relationship between creativity and plurilingualism/culturalism* (by Aine Furlong)

This paper is an account of a piloting experience which took place in October 2005 in Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland, with 10 teachers from the primary and the tertiary sectors. The pilot phase lasted six hours during which the following activities were trialled:

- understanding 'in-between' spaces
- when 'in-between' spaces are painted
- when 'in-between' spaces are mentioned
- looking for meaning
- how can 'in-between' spaces be used to initiate dialogue?

As a preamble to these activities, an introduction to the LEA project and to the concepts of plurilingualism/culturalism, multiculturalism and intercultural communication was presented. An activity designed to build trust and cooperation between participants followed. This process encouraged participants to form sub-groups and to draw circles around aspects of their personalities which defined them best. They were also asked to produce a poster for their sub-group and to find ways of indicating to others the identification or circle that was shared by others in the group. The outcome led to the production of separate circles for each member with a few bearing a symbol that was 'culturally' shared by the group; on display of the posters, participants realised how each group had established a culture within itself (shared symbol) and how each circle was separated from the next by an 'in-between' space. This 'in-between' space would become the focus of the training experience. This very successful activity was an adaptation of Dr Viera Bockova's *My circles of identity*.

What follows, reports on participants' observations and reactions to the five activities listed above.

a. Understanding 'in-between' spaces

The purpose of this activity is to familiarise participants with the abstract concept of liminal or 'in-between' spaces. Following a reading (see the text by Bhabha in Appendix A of the training pack) , participants provided concrete examples of 'in-between' spaces within a professional, social and/or a personal context such as:

- o Common spaces (the corridor, the lobby, the atrium, the train and bus stations, the airport).

Participants also mentioned 'in-between' times where/when an adjustment of the 'self' is made

- o the time when a class ends and teacher is not teaching anymore;
- o switching TV channels, particularly of different languages – in Ireland, they represent English and Irish speaking channels as well as foreign channels;
- o the road to work with its lake becoming a landmark and a signal for the private self to switch to the public self.

Additional perceptions of 'in-between' spaces made reference to

- o spaces where there is an excessive display of information,
- o confusion in understanding,

- grey areas,
- unfamiliar surroundings,
- travelling,
- being a foreigner, a refugee.

These spaces were described as disorderly, confusing, causing disorientation, disturbance and restlessness. However, they were identified as being fundamentally democratic since hierarchical identities are erased in common spaces, i.e. the teacher is just another person next to the student in the corridor. These spaces call for the re-adjustment of the self and have a humbling and 'levelling' effect such as that experienced by travellers on removing their shoes at the airport security check.

The consequence of an 'in-between' space experience is twofold; it may lead to a heightened sense of who we are, that is, the awareness of the components that constitute our cultural identities – I am a teacher, a student, a mother, a father, a cook, a gardener, *etc.* It may also be the realisation of the impermanence and unfixed nature of these cultural identities.

Additional examples to illustrate the move-away from class and gender as suggested by Bhabha included the phenomenon of immigration (a PhD. Graduate can be a waiter and vice-versa). Teenage fashion and gay marriage laws also create distance from traditional perceptions of gender. Globalisation in terms of, for example, age, class and gender can erode traditional perceptions. The hierarchy of class is transcended by money. Class is not a fixed state anymore and has been replaced by transient classes.

The outcome of this activity established the sense that the places identified above as well as new identities associated with globalisation were particularly suitable for change to happen because one can look beyond 'old' ways of defining people.

b. When 'in-between' spaces are painted

The support materials for this activity create a visual awareness of 'in-between' spaces as well as of the restlessness experienced in these spaces.

Participants were asked to study images of the work of Goulding, Gunning, Lalor and Lawlor (see Activity 2. in training pack)

Tim Goulding: *Tender Fractures*

The painting suggests a state of flux with a mix of vertical lines – a structured space – and transient lines – a state of flux. The two images create a mirror effect - yet, not quite. There seems to be a contrast between defined and undefined spaces, perhaps the private vs. the public self or society and civilisation vs. nature. The painting conveys a sense of vulnerability with stitches appearing on one of the images and open wounds on the other. Perhaps, while the external wound gives the appearance of on-going healing, the internal wound has not begun the healing process yet. The colours are undefined and very beautiful, earthy and convey a sense of ageing.

Participants viewed this painting as the expression of a personal story. The group agreed that the idea of multiple identities in the form of the private and the public selves was present. This remark was extended to the situation of asylum seekers who on arriving in a foreign country are in a state of flux and vulnerability, possibly hiding internal wounds while displaying apparent signs of healing.

Stephen Gunning: *Window Cleaner*

The glass pane creates an 'in-between' space. In this space it is possible to see in and out. When looking out through the clean glass, one discovers the appearance of the window cleaner who is of Asian origin. The cleaner is outside, he can see us as he makes the effort of creating transparency. It is up to us to look outside. The space is dynamic as we can see moving and disappearing traces of soap. The cleaner is in control of making the window transparent and this bridges the gap between inside and outside. In this connection, participants noted how an outsider is expected to produce more efforts in order to make him/herself more accessible, more transparent, how vulnerable the subject may feel as a result of this decision and how pro-active the process is.

Although time to further consider the implications of Gunning's piece was not available, it is obvious that a discussion relating to in-groups and out-groups would be fruitful.

Brian Lalor: *Fir Bolg and Borderlands I and II*

The kind of 'in-between' space suggested by the borderland paintings evokes alienation, and a no-man's land which does not bear the same possibilities as those of a space that is shared by all. It suggests conflict and violence, fences and watch towers. The blue background behind the terrorist's painting is seen as an 'in-between' space. The central role of politics in such spaces was discussed.

Niamh Lawlor: *Speaker Holes*

A disturbing piece. It separates speech from the head of the speaker and places the voice in the 'in-between' space of the neck/throat. Is it to create a direct link with the emotions of the speaker which are often held back in the throat of the speaker? Is it to distance verbal expression from reason?

The first session of the piloting experience ended here. Informal exchanges during the week suggested that participants were highly stimulated by the notion of liminal spaces. They had become aware of these spaces around them, some had identified potentially creative spaces for themselves: a teacher decided that the development of CLIL materials was her own 'in-between' space, where her expertise, her curiosity of other subjects and her creativity could meet in a useful manner. Another teacher cut out a newspaper article describing how a corridor and doors had been used for plurilingual/cultural expression in a school in Dublin.

c. When 'in-between' spaces are mentioned

This activity refreshes participants memory of the concepts explored the previous week. It also intensifies their emerging awareness of these spaces. In ideal conditions, the activity leads to the conscious assembly of multiple identities in the form of a mosaic.

Having read the literary excerpts in Appendix B, participants made a list of all the items describing 'in-between' spaces, pieces, restlessness and re-construction. As well as words, the full stops in the Anna Livia poem were also identified as 'in-between' spaces. Therefore, the necessity to pause, accepting that we don't always understand everything, oppositions, juxtaposition, self-reflection, self criticism and unrest were noted

as central to the re-construction process. The purpose of re-construction is to understand more and better.

Unfortunately, as our piloting time was limited, we were not able to construct the mosaic. This was deeply regretted by participants and I would urge future trainers to include this process in the training course. Equipped with the list describing 'in-between' spaces, the representation of these spaces in the mosaic would have been particularly interesting: would participants have chosen 'windows', 'gaps', 'apertures', 'hairline cracks', 'fissures', 'fractures', 'building blocks', 'fragments', full stops? In re-constructing the identity of their own group, would they have chosen 'to give shape to [their] vision and identity', to 'evoke alternative possibilities'? (for more details, see the literary excerpts in Appendix B)

d. Looking for meaning

This activity defines inner speech as a means of acquiring meaning; it shows that the process is dynamic, constantly reshaping itself. In this context, an excerpt from *Finnegan's Wake* was read with great interest particularly since one of the participants was Italian (many of the words in the text are Italian). The cultural references were also identified (references to the harp – Ireland – and the crown – England). This led to a discussion about the changing nature of meaning – teenager words – and how dependent meaning is on context and shared cultural knowledge.

As part of the task, a number of group utterances were produced and recorded on tape. The tape was played again at a later stage of the course. The pause between recording and playing the utterances again was identified as a new 'in-between' space! The utterances were meaningful, only because participants were aware of the context within which these had been produced. The productions included invented words made up of phonemes/sounds from different languages; words made up of morphemes/units of meanings from different languages creating contrasting and alternative meanings, and finally, utterances grouping together participants' favourite words in a variety of languages.

This led to the possibilities of using a similar exercise within our own professional environment as a way of hearing the silenced languages in many of our classrooms. The activity also shows the difficulties that a foreigner can encounter when the context/history/culture of words is not shared.

e. How can 'in-between' spaces be used to initiate dialogue?

Participants who had completed their circles of identity in the early stages of the workshop had mentioned curiosity as one of the defining elements of their identities. It seemed natural to explore this question as it arises in Worksheet 8. Reflection on curiosity being associated with insubordination was discussed. It was noted that a foreigner through his/her curiosity may be perceived to be slightly insubordinate since questions are asked about what is taken for granted and unquestioned usually by those who share the culture.

Suggestions on how to encourage curiosity in plurilingual/cultural learning environments were made as follows:

- sow seeds, ask questions, provide visual stimuli, be somebody else and ask 'w' questions (where, what, why, when), take things apart and put them back together again, create experience books, bring visitors to the class, conduct

science experiments, visit museums, watch, make videos, read and write poems, organise quizzes, encourage problem-solving, travel.

This last activity brought the workshop to an end. Members of the group were extremely positive about the experience and realised that more time should be given to making explicit links between creativity and plurilingualism/culturalism (approximately 20 hours...).

The purpose of these activities was to establish the relationship between creativity and plurilingualism/culturalism. By studying writings and paintings as well as musical examples, participants develop a gradual awareness of the creative potential of 'in-between' spaces. Artists and writers speak of and paint these spaces – see for example, Goulding's paintings which 'hover on the boundary of abstraction and realism'; artists also mention the idea of using their art as a connector: 'all things are connected, and in a fragmented world art is a great connector' (Boydell 2005), or Goulding's attempt 'to retain resonance of the world outside' (2005), or Joyce's connection of languages and cultures into single utterances which open up new world views, new understandings, new possibilities. In parallel, linguists such as Maalouf and Hoffman recognise that plurilinguals inhabit 'in-between' spaces. Maalouf, like Bhabha, also suggests the important role such people have in becoming connectors between different cultures. Hence, it becomes apparent that plurilinguals and creative individuals share one dimension, initially described by Bhabha as an 'in-between' space; once this space is sensed, it can be used creatively since it enables the dual act of looking in and looking out as a means of understanding to take place.

Interestingly, a recent article in the Irish Times (13/3/2006) entitled *Weak bonds, strong society* states that Canada's success as the most diverse society on earth lies in its failure to forge a nation state with one identity. As a result of Confederation in 1867 the constitution recognised that 'English Canada and French Canada were different: each wanted to develop on its own; both were willing to entrust a weak general government with matters of joint concern'. John Ibbitson describes this 'culture of accommodation as a bad recipe for forging a great nation state, but a perfect recipe for assimilating a succession of differing ethnicities'. The allowance for an 'in-between' space in Canadian society, that is, a living space between the two cultural entities of France and Britain, has produced 'a creative and entrepreneurial explosion that is reshaping both [the Canadian] economy and culture'. The impression is one of dynamism, a country in the making or, as put by the author, in the 'becoming'. The journalist refers to 'the energy of the place, the strange fusion cuisine, the creative tensions that you find in an office filled with workers from half a dozen different cultures, each bringing a unique perspective to the problem at hand'. Finally, while Ibbitson recognises the social problems of his country, he believes that it is out of this culture of accommodation that politeness has emerged as a powerful instrument now used to 'foment a social revolution', i.e. one that brings people from everywhere to construct a new, diverse, young-thinking, forward-looking Canada.

In this light, it seems that a combination of awareness of 'in-between' spaces, as well as the resolve to interact respectfully with others within these spaces should lead to creative dynamics in our personal, social and professional dimensions. This is one step in the direction of enjoying the surprising and rich fruits of diversity.