

Why not?

Intercultural dialogue may be perceived as a lofty way to simply describe a conversation between two or more people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Difference in how individuals view and consider the world from divergent standpoints is inherently recognised to encourage healthy debate across cultural borders. On the launch of 2008 as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue UNESCO acknowledged intercultural dialogue as a 'vital skill':

In an increasingly globalised and interdependent world, where encountering cultural difference can scarcely be avoided, the ability to enter into a tolerant and respectful dialogue is a vital skill for nations, communities, and individuals.

Educators in particular, at university level are singled out to engage in the task of inspiring their students to participate in intercultural dialogue as UNESCO acknowledge that in this context

higher education institutions have an important role to play. Disciplines, teaching methods, student skills, and knowledge itself can be deepened and strengthened through an intercultural dialogue approach

However, despite good intentions and 'best practice' policy approaches to adjusting to an 'increasingly globalised' world, communication may break down among communities, or indeed fail to take place at all. In Ireland we have witnessed this breakdown or often total lack of involvement between Irish 'settled' and 'Traveller' communities. It is not a case where a new group of people who perhaps do not speak English have recently arrived to our island. The Traveller Community have lived alongside 'settled folk' as they refer to non Traveller Irish for centuries. We may adopt the word 'alongside' as Travellers most frequently reside in caravans along the roadsides up and down the country so they can easily pack up and move (or indeed are removed), as opposed to living in standard housing within the confines of the Irish town or city. A nomadic way of life is central to understanding their cultural identity. This difference in choice of lifestyle often represents the crux of the challenge between the two communities.

One Irish Traveller comments on how this essential part of what makes up their identity is often not given a chance to breathe:

Our way of life has been pushed to the edge of Irish life. People have also caused a lot of hardship for Travellers by simply ignoring us, but doing nothing, by denying us our identity, and by giving us little or no space to be ourselves - Travellers, nomads of Ireland.

When we speak about intercultural dialogue the critical starting point is to create a space to allow people to meet and interact. Yet, prior to this, what is often overlooked or indeed the assumption is made that each individual already has a space to express and practice their own culture. Unfortunately this is not the reality. Without the space for a minority group individual to 'be'

themselves their own identity is stifled moreover, it is very likely that the desire to engage with or human curiosity to find out about 'the other' especially if the 'other', in this case the 'settled folk' demonstrate no real concern for their basic needs.

Assumptions have the potential to breed stereotypes about individuals, communities, nations and indeed whole continents. 'Stereotyping' literally means 'rigid impression' or 'solid image'. It first came into use over 200 years ago in Greek and Latin. At this time it was used to describe how a stereotype, or a mould, was used to print identical copies of documents. The notion of rigid identical copies seems paradoxical in reference to our human identity as today our identity is thought of as a non static entity. Stereotyping can be a huge barrier to intercultural communication. Once a community is categorised in a negative manner it is extremely difficult to undo the damage to its social standing within the wider community. In a climate of immigration many people from diverse cultural backgrounds are working 'alongside' local Irish people and their children are being educated together. However, in a very similar way to how the Irish Travellers have been sidelined to the fringes of society the newcomers are jostling for space in Irish society.

UNESCO hi-lighted the tough task for educators in assisting young peoples' development of the skills of intercultural dialogue. Ignorance breeds fear is a familiar mantra. Opening up to and learning about the 'other' and their different value systems and beliefs is the initial step. According to the well known sociolinguist Noam Chomsky, from an early age children replicate learned behavioural and language patterns. Maintaining one's own distinct cultural heritage is comforting when adjusting to a new environment, from finding a space to practice one's own religious faith to locating the specific 'ethnic' ingredients to prepare one's own traditional dishes. At the same time, to facilitate a smooth cultural transition and reduce anxiety during a period of often dramatic and traumatic changes, prior knowledge of the language of the the host nation or if this is not the case enrolment in classes on arrival is crucial to the overall successful adaptation process.

Gaining linguistic competence is often a long and laborious task. Furthermore, migrants who plan to work in Ireland need to master the language in a short span of time in order to access the labour market. Large mixed ability classes can hinder students' performance for language exams which are a requirement for third level education and most professions.

Clearly there are many diverse obstacles to achieving competent intercultural dialogue and in this current climate of economic slump where critical resources for the promotion of Interculturalism, (for example the '100% cut' of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) which worked to combat racial discrimination for the last eleven years in Ireland) are being radically reduced even more so, however in pinpointing the obstacles we can face the challenge they pose through working and collaborating together in all sectors of the community.