



This paper is taken from

*Future Citizens in Europe
Proceedings of the fourth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2002

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 356 5

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Kratsborn, W. (2002) The past, the present and future didactics. A constructivistic field of view in the light of 11 September, in Ross, A. (ed) Future Citizens in Europe. London: CiCe, pp 209 - 216

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- The University of North London (now part of the London Metropolitan University) for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the European Commission Department of Education and Culture for their support and encouragement.

The past, the present and future didactics. A constructivistic field of view in the light of 11 September

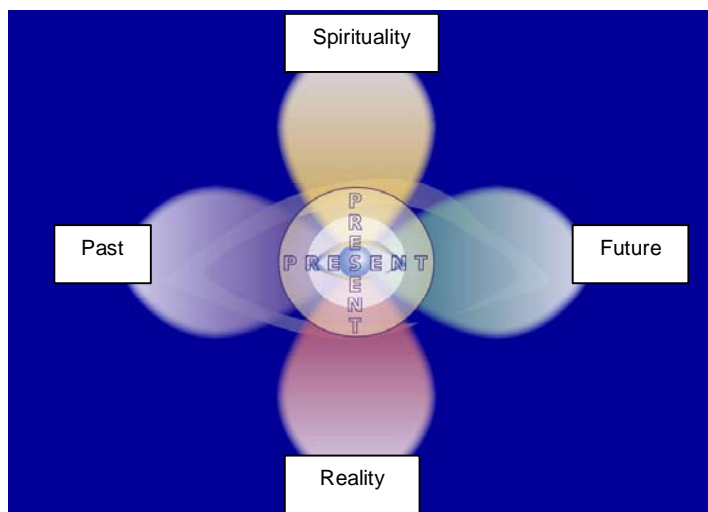
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*A man lost his keys. He searched for it under the lamp.
'You've lost the keys in the corner', a friend said.
The man answered: 'I can see better here.
Shine on you crazy diamond (Pink Floyd)*

Biking between the meadows of Groningen on the 11 September 2001, I heard the news about the terrorist attacks on my mobile phone. I did not believe it. An hour later news of the attacks had spread all over the world. It made me think of other world-shaking events such as the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. My head was full of questions. What was the meaning of this? Was it the end of the world as we know it? What is the relationship between the past, the present, the future - and the human being? What should be the meaning of 11 September in the education of young people? Can education play a constructive role in a deconstructed world?

11 September will be my orientation point to construct a field of view on reality and future didactics. Education should be realistic and meaningful to young people.



'The field of view'

*If you try to make a building, the building is you.
Richard Rorty*

'The field of view' is a thinking scheme from four different perspectives. It provides a balanced vision of reality, despite reality's chaotic complexity. On the horizontal axis is the timeline of the past, the present and the future. The vertical line is the philosophical

and psychological link between spirituality and reality. The events of 11 September will be looked at as a confluence of the different fields.

The field of the past

The past that's no history

What is history? History is the result of millions of (un)conscious, (un)intended and (un)predictable human acts. Most of it has faded away forever. Mankind infiltrates and manipulates history and he is the only living creature that can do that consciously. "Man makes history but he doesn't know which history" (Semprun). History could have been completely different, because it is senseless and aimless. The meaning of history is *our* meaning of history. There is not one truth, but many truths. That is why people disagree about the meaning of history. What happened on 11 September shows that the historical truth of Democratic Liberalism is false from the perspective of Authoritarian Fundamentalism. The West has seen itself as the historical winner, particularly since 1989, but Fundamentalists feel bad about history. A millennium ago Islam was a sparkling civilisation bordering on a crude medieval Europe, but then the Europeans sacked Jerusalem and annexed Islamic science, its mathematics and its arts to bring about the European Renaissance. The rise of Western civilisation since the fifteenth century was synchronous with the fall of Islamic civilisation. Later Europe rose to dominate most of the world and scooped up the majority of Muslims into various European empires: fair cause for resentment.

Nowadays Fundamentalists are against and afraid of the free market mechanism, the so-called 'McWorld': they are looking for their roots in the past. The Taliban in particular wants to go back to the Middle Ages with the burka, and they prescribe that the beard should be a bit longer than a can of cola. The events on 11 September reactivated history like Vietnam, Imperialism, the Cold War, Fascism, D-Day and the Crusades.

The field of the future

The present is the past of the future

The future is not as it used to be, because unpredictable and chaotic processes are going on. Did things really change after 11 September, or is it just a matter of consciousness? Is the success of the liberal capitalism a 'self-denying prophecy?' We are not going anywhere and there is no director as there is in a film, despite the 'world coalition' against terror. It is clear that since 11 September another light is shining on the Third World as well as on McWorld. The unsolved problems of the past are still facing us. Is it possible to recover lost time in the future? Our reaction to 11 September is more important for the future than the attack itself.

The field of spirituality

'God is not dead, he's just working on a less ambitious project'

People are constantly searching for their identity. During their quest they try to recognise themselves in something higher or bigger. A religion or an ideology is a spiritual way to feel safe and hopeful. Most of the 'isms' (such as fascism and communism) have become 'wasms' except for Fundamentalism, an extreme part of Islam. Is this field of spirituality man-made? Spirituality is static and universal. It is the fundamental task of *homo sapiens*

to come as close as possible. This is why spirituality is interpreted in different ways. Fundamentalism is a static and collective power that insists that followers lose their individual identities and look upon non-believers as enemies. For millions of people Fundamentalism is the only way to escape poverty: it is an absolute and collective protection against the individualism, materialism, hedonism and relativism of the West. The revelation of the Koran is the absolute truth and Allah is everywhere at every time. The text of the Koran has not changed since the twelfth century. This is the confrontation between the static, monolithic and closed Fundamentalism and the dynamic, pluralistic and open Capitalism. Is history an eternal fight between the progressive powers of rationality, freedom and cooperation and the regressive powers of irrationality, religious monolithic thinking and fundamental intolerance? The fundamentalists are hurt to the core of their souls by Western civilisation. It is not a coincidence that the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers was an attack on a symbol of the West.

The field of reality

Contrary to the upper field, this lower field can be experienced and changed (un)consciously. This is reality or the 'world of phenomena' (Kant). There is no visual experience without eyes, no auditory experience without ears, and no thought without brains. This field is empirical by ratio or emotions. According to Carl Jung the collective unconsciousness is the fundament of emotions like fear, anger and sorrow. People try to change these emotions positively into safety, justice and happiness. Negative emotions are a kind of chain reaction and are hard to stop: hate causes hate and 11 September is an example. Crazy world, crazy times.

The present

'Welcome to the desert of the real' (the film 'The Matrix')

Perhaps reality is more mythical than we can understand rationally. It is the tragedy of freedom, because evil is a self-made and present monster. Bad people are also living in this world. After Auschwitz we should have known this. 'It happened and it might happen again' (Ido Abram). 11 September makes us all accomplices, all responsible. We are obliged to learn some lessons about the unpredictable human factor. We are groping in the dark. Is this the right time for an Islamic Renaissance, an Islamic Luther or a new enlightenment?

Future didactics: constructivism

'the story of shattered life can only be told in bits and pieces'(Rilke).

What is the appropriate learning style to integrate the field of view and the subjective concepts of young people? Constructivism helps young people to construct their own subjective concept or field of view. It makes them competent to deal with the dynamic reality in a multi-perspective way. The learner constructs his own knowledge in communication with others, in 'a multilogue'. He learns to learn according to his own experiences, needs, expectations and motives. It is an active, cooperative, creative and communicative process that fits exactly into the personal cognitive structure. It helps the child, the pupil or the student to find the key, and to construct a personal field of view which includes reality, himself and the 'other'.

The key-elements are:

- Reality is not found but is constructed with knowledge, because the observation of reality is subjective.
- The learner needs a framework, a structure to link the fields and to feel safe ('safe didactics'). The learner's control should be as great as possible.
- Knowledge has to be meaningful and applicable, linked to reality and to the learner. Knowledge is legitimised by its meaningfulness and the functionality for the learner. It is essential that learners look at reality from different perspectives.
Real learning depends on motivation with challenging and creative didactics (music, art, ICT and philosophy).
The step-by-step-method is a training to deal with the fragmented reality. Every step is an anchor linked as instruction to a context (a video, a practical problem or a challenging case).
- Making and doing is the most efficient way to learn. Active didactics are applicable to the gathering of knowledge, the working methods and to presentation. ('orientation knowledge'). A learning-style becomes a life-style with all the required skills, norms and values.
- The learning environment is challenging by simulations and different perspectives on norms, values, truths, interpretations, solutions, and so on. Democratic learning is multi-perspectivist and empathic. It is essential to use the whole scale of variations in working forms, images and presentation.
- Learning should be a productive, interactive and creative process instead of a reproductive and passive one ('digital didactics'). Cooperative and problem oriented learning are constructivist features.

The constructivistic route with 3 columns and 8 steps

Column 1: Information

New information and skills are situated in the left column as text, video, music, sound or image. The information is intellectual as well as emotional. Basic information is offered for all the learners. Group-information is for a level group.

Column 2: Subjective concept

The subjective concept with norms, values, interests, opinions and behaviour is situated in the middle column. Learning is the exchange of different perspectives in learning situations in order to build a personal identity.

Column 3: Reality or practice

The application of new knowledge in reality or practice by making, doing, evaluation and presentation is situated in the right column. The applicability is the legitimisation of the learning process.

Route 11 / 9		
Information	Subjective concept	Reality / Practice
	<p><i>Step 1</i> The sense-opener : a video clip, a circle-talk, story-telling and/or an interactive poster</p>	
<p><i>Step 2</i> Gathering basic information about Fundamentalism and democratic Liberalism (internet) Problem solving.</p>		<p><i>Step 3</i> Making or doing something with the information in a working corner The visualisation and sharing of knowledge by a work paper and an image</p>
	<p><i>Step 4</i> Evaluation of the working-corner by the groups Communication with other learners, schools or institutions (museums) Story-telling by the teacher</p>	
<p><i>Step 5</i> Gathering information and preparing the presentation. Knowledge is deepened, widened and 'emotionalised'</p>		<p><i>Step 6</i> Interactive and creative group presentation</p>
	<p><i>Step 7</i> Reflection on the route. Story-telling by the teacher. Communication by e-mail with other learners or institutions</p>	
	<p><i>Step 8</i> Integration and application in the own life-style or environment</p>	

The eight steps

The total route consists of eight steps. Every learner gets a route-book with eight steps which link the three columns. Basic information, instruction and materials are prepared. Each new step is comparable to Vygotsky's nearest learning phase. Step by step the learner constructs his own dynamic structure ('scaffolding') in a meaningful and applicable way. He constructs knowledge by linking information, his subjective concept and reality.

Step 1

This is the sense-opener. It is a motivating, creative and emotional starting-point (an object, a video clip, music, sounds, an interactive poster or a story). An emotional link is created between the subject and the learner and the route is prelected.

The video clip 'Overcome' of the group Live is shown. In circle-talk learners share their first emotional reaction to the attacks and the teacher tells his story. The central question is: 'What does it mean to you?'

Step 2

This is a basic step, because knowledge and skills about the subject are gathered in a powerful learning environment. All learners get the same basic multi-perspectivist information. Pieces of information are put together as a scaffold and to guarantee a basic level for all the learners. Knowledge is constructed from different perspectives in a problem-solving, interactive, creative and reflective way.

The class is divided in task groups with specific information.

ICT is used as a source of information with the internet, an interactive CD-ROM and links to several museums or institutions. The learner has to use all his senses to explore text, images and sound (music), and other sources of knowledge.

After Step 2 the learner is asked to talk about it at home and to get some feedback. The class is divided into two groups. One group has to gather information about the democratic perspective and the other group information about the fundamentalist perspective. Each group is divided into three subgroups. The basic information and the images about the past, the future, the emotions and spirituality are placed in a field of view.

Every group has to answer the same questions about religion, historical background, economy and daily life.

Step 3

The information gathered in Step 2 is evaluated and shared in a creative (an object, a situation, a collage) and informative way (a work paper with information and graphic organisers). It is productive learning, exhibited in a work corner. This is a very constructive way of cooperative learning, because every group provides a part of the total construction. Every group makes an object as well as a working paper with information to show to the other groups.

Every group makes a collage from the four different perspectives of the field of view with text and images from the internet. The field is a kind of mind-map visualised on a big poster (50/70 centimetres) and exhibited in a working corner.

Step 4

This is a communication step. In a circle-talk the learners evaluate the exhibited objects, images and working papers in the corner. The teacher gets an overall look at what the groups are doing and corrects if necessary. Homework is given ('ask an expert'). The groups communicate with learners from other schools, institutions or museums using ICT. Each group gets another subject and task to prepare a presentation for the other learners. The learners negotiate between the different perspectives and about the selectivity of information. They recognise the similarities and the differences. During this step the learners concentrate on the impact of 11 September through questions about the causes, impact, emotions, different perspectives and consequences.

Step 5

This is the preparation of the presentation in an inspirational learning environment consisting of information, materials, images, sound and internet links. New knowledge is gathered, deepened and widened. In this step one member of the group uses ICT as a source of knowledge when it is needed.

The class is divided in six task-groups. Each group has to present its vision about 11 September. During the presentation the group has to communicate with the other groups through small interactive tasks. Photographs are used individually as an informative and creative source of knowledge.

Step 6

The presentation of the groups is a form of interactive, cooperative and productive learning. It is important that the former steps are integrated in a balance between creativity and information. The different groups construct together a wide and multi-perspective field of view. ICT is used as an interactive presentation form. At the end of the presentation is an end-ceremony (singing or dramatic). One or two learners from each group illuminate their work with a PowerPoint presentation. The other groups are active during the presentation.

It is a presentation of the change of their own subjective concept.

Step 7

Each learner makes a personal and a group reflection and communicates by e-mail with other schools, institutions or museums. By listening to each other and respecting different opinions the learners use 'demodactics'. Constructivism is an adaptive, cooperative and meaningful way of learning. A circle-talk is organised to reflect on the route, and the clip 'Overcome' by Live is repeated. The learners share their norms and values in relation to the events of 11 September.

This intersubjective concept is a good exercise in empathy. The learners try to understand the other perspectives. The teacher tells a story about his reactions on 11 September. By e-mail experiences are shared with learners from other schools.

Step 8

The last step is a kind of cross-over to reality and to the next subject. How may the route be integrated and applied in the life-style of the learner? These 'actionmas' (normative behaviour) make it more motivating, meaningful, applicable and realistic.

The learners send a letter with photographs to young people in Afghanistan or the United States and share their personal feelings about 11 September. They also try to write about the consequences for their own subjective concept or field of view.