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# 7 Conflict and the Cognitive Empire: Byram's Critical Cultural Awareness

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## Introduction

1997 saw the European Union in its ascendancy. Eight years after the Fall of the Berlin wall, seven years after German Reunification, the post-Soviet era was well under way and it was clear that the new era of globalisation and movement of people, goods and capital were sweeping all before them. 9/11 had not yet destabilised the anticipation of the beginning of the new millennium (Yurchak, 2006), and the greatest active fears lay with the Balkan wars, Rwandan genocide and Y2K computer compliance. Peace time Europe was fully alive with its potential and consolidating approaches to its European project. Into this context *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Byram, 1997) brought a particular focus on the role of critical cultural awareness. It was necessary. The intercultural project was in its infancy -- the term 'intercultural' largely one developed in North America and with roots in NATO -- and the work of peace needed some gentle probing through democratic educational initiatives, and ones which would play well with Lyotard's Postmodern Condition (Lyotard, 1984).

Any fair critique of Byram's undeniable contribution to intercultural education world-wide must begin with this philosophical and material context.

In this chapter I will review some of the ways in which critical engagement of Byram's work has proceeded (Gramling, 2016; M. Guilherme, 2002; Hoff, 2014; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013; A. Phipps, 2014) and the paradigms from which they have emerged. I shall consider the dangers of presentism in critiques of work which was part of the architecture of an era already very different to our own, and the importance of the foundation Byram's lay for precisely the kinds of critical cultural awareness he advocates.

Importantly, however, I shall engage with the present decolonial context and the ways in which Byram's work might be interpreted and stands in comparison to, for instance, present critiques and the postcolonial projects of the 1990s (Gregory, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2019). To this end, I will utilise the work of Santos and his critique of cognition and awareness in models designed for peace time (Santos, 2018), and suggest ways of acknowledging and also hoping for an age when we might return to the utility of models which are designed for kinder conditions of life and learning.

## Decolonising Intercultural Communicative Competence

It would be easy to begin a chapter on Byram's extensive work, in 2021, after the rise and rise of the #BlackLivesMatters movement, and the rise and rise of calls for 'decolonising' every

aspect of the Western curriculum in schools and universities, with a simplistic critique. 'Presentism' is the term used in critical assessments of work which fails to take the context of writing, the material possibilities of an age and the nuance of which avenues are available for exploration, into account. Presentism would be at work in an assessment of Byram's work which argued that his work was problematic because it offers Anglo-normative, Eurocentric curricular models which reflect the position of a white, male, professor at an elite university. This would also be a grossly unfair assessment of the work. 25 years on from the writing of *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* and from the publication of quite frankly more books than many have had hot dinners, Byram's contribution to intercultural language education, to the development of diverse and nuanced models of assessment of learning in schools, universities and teacher education world-wide, is unparalleled. It is empirically grounded, theoretically modelled and has stood the test of time in policy and curricular terms. It has enabled mainstream education to embed intercultural models in its practice and training.

This present age, however, has concerns of its own, which are not those of the 1990s and 2000s, when Byram was capacitating a large, global, and yes – largely European cohort of postgraduate and postdoctoral early career scholars through Cultnet, through many, varied publishing initiatives and collaborations. That Byram's work – and the work of the majority of scholars working in the nascent European context of intercultural studies in the 1990s – was predominantly white, Anglophone or Francophone, with some strong German publications - reflects the material base supporting the publication of work in this area. This in and of itself, reflects the processes within education and research which produced the context of the 1990s, into which work which was seeking to produce a European skillset, an integration and a citizenry, was pitched. Raymond Williams's contended that, "Form always has an active material base" (Williams, 1977) (186) as he sought to work culturally, through the limitations of traditional Marxist thought with its determinisms of base and superstructure. In short, Williams was allowing for dynamism, agency, fluidity, the ways in which escape could be made from simple economic determinism.

The presentisms of a simplistic critique in 2021 would analyse Byram's references in his 1997 text for the presence of scholars from the Global South. It would see if the now canonical decolonial, and postcolonial scholars, were present – the Fanons and N'gūgis. It would read only his work in English, ignoring the body of work undertaken with Genevieve Zarate, for instance, and the pioneering equality of writing with women which is a hallmark of Byram's scholarship. It would look for contributions from Black scholars in the Americas, and Africa. It would, with the first filters of search terms, draw more or less a blank, and draw conclusions which are limited, presentist and structurally naïve. But the damage would be done.

With this opening, it will be clear, that I wish to read against the grain of the present moment of decolonial scholarly anger, whilst at the same time contributing myself to the development of a decolonising scholarship of multilingual, decolonial action, and being greatly in sympathy, critically and aesthetically with the anger and its effect. In recent work I have argued that there is no pure place to stand in the work to change the economic and material base, the cultural

structures which allow equal access to elite education, higher education, worldwide, and within our own state in the UK (Fassetta, 2020; A. Phipps, 2018, 2019; A. S. Phipps, Tawona; Tordzro, Gameli; Tordzro, Naa Densua, 2020). I am clear that an intercultural scholarship will need to weigh questions of structural equity carefully and build on the work undertaken in the struggles for post and decolonial freedoms across the former British Empires, and other European Empires – as described by Santos (Santos, 2002). It builds substantially out of critiques and elaborations of Byram's work, notably by scholars **setting a context for Eurocentricity** and pointing to wider global frameworks, postcoloniality, languages beyond the monolingualisms of Europe and the tendency of the scholarship in intercultural studies towards the transcendent, rather than the immanent in its prescriptions: (Gramling, 2016; M. Guilherme, 2002; Hoff, 2014; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013; A. Phipps, 2014).

### **Language and Culture**

The 'quick' of Byram's scholarship – what binds his project of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural citizenship together over time – is found in the debates of the 1970s and 1980s on language and culture. Language as an articulation of the superstructure, culture as a noun, a verb, a way of life, a distinctive patterning of societies were all examined meticulously via a variety of critical and deconstructive lens. There was much in the project of linguistic and cultural deconstruction that was yet to find a practical and pragmatic articulation and some of the tropes and approaches to Byram's scholarship can be found in his firm footing within empirical education sciences and his work on qualitative methodological innovations for the study of culture and construction of intercultural competence. Particular works such as *Language Learners as Ethnographers* (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001) and *Developing Intercultural Communication in Practice* (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001) point to this methodological and pedagogical concern. In an expanding Europe, with ERASMUS and SOCRATES projects in development, the practicality was an urgent task and responded to reports, for instance, of failings in student programmes and placements abroad in modern and foreign language education in particular (Coleman, 2001).

Beyond Europe, in what was then referred to as the 'third world', and is now referred to as 'the Global South', the scholarship was largely postcolonial in nature, and equally marked by the pragmatism and theoretical polarisations that were broadly present in European scholarship at this time. Responses to the Ethiopian famine, development of the millennium development goals and Make Poverty History / Jubilee 2000 campaigns, together with the rise in islamophobia, responses to the 'War on Terror' post-2001 all made the ecosystems of scholarship both practical and highly theoretical. The postcolonial work which was able to tread water through Said's *Orientalism* (Said, 1995); Mbembe's *De La Postcolonie* (Mbembé, 2000), Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (Pratt, 2008) and the work of translation studies (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Bassnett-McGuire, 1980; Cronin, 2000) up until the urgency of the second decolonial wave, developed largely apart from education and pedagogy, and within the arts and humanities. Attempts to bridge these fields came from within the ***International Association for Languages and Intercultural Communication (IALIC)***, but were uneasy, marked by suspicions, and more pragmatically, different journals and book series and doctoral training programmes which funnelled work into separate disciplines, despite the interdisciplinary

claims and aspirations of the fields. The merging of work in the field of social sciences with arts and humanities is a long and difficult, enduring interdisciplinary task. As Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1988) has noted, academic scholarly work is set in fields with their own norms, rituals and markers of distinction, and the overcoming of these for interdisciplinarity takes time. It also requires risk and the ability to work within new fields which have not yet attained the same markers of distinction such as journals with history and standing or academic associations with several decades of meetings and sufficient capital to sustain their work, and to institutionalise their new fields. The first personal chairs in the field of intercultural studies were only established around ten years ago in the U.K. and it's only in 2015 that funding to develop work undertaken in education on intercultural communicative competence began to have real structural influence in the field of modern languages through the work of the Translating Cultures thematic funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council project Transnationalising Modern Languages (Spadaro, Burdett, Creese, Forsdick, & Phipps, 2020)

Despite all of these strong material, political and structurally disciplining dimensions, Byram's work bears consideration for the role it plays in creating conditions for and sustaining work from and with the Global South. This may not be the mainstay of his work, but it is present.

In 2000 Manuela Guilherme successfully defended her PhD thesis, under Byram's supervision, in which she pursued a critical pedagogy approach to the concept of intercultural communicative competence, and the 'Savoirs' in the Common European Framework of Reference. The subsequent book of her thesis was published in the Multilingual Matters book Series, *Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education*, which Byram established with myself, in 1999 (see Guilherme, 2002). It was the third book to be published in this series and it took, in part what, in today's academic terminology, would be called a 'southern epistemological' theoretical position. It rests on scholars from the Global South, notably the work of Paulo Freire, and melds these with the critical political scholarship of North American scholars, Giroux and McLaren, but also situations the work within the criticality of post war European philosophy and the work of Habermas, and of poststructuralisms of Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and Lyotard (Freire, 1998, 2003, 2006; Giroux, 1988; M. Guilherme, 2002; M. M. Guilherme, 2000; McLaren, 1995). Byram's supervision of this thesis and openness to a critical pedagogical development of his own frameworks is in many ways typical of the collaborative and capacitating approach to scholarship.

A second book in the early list of the LICE book series also requires consideration. As series editors many proposals passed over our desks. Our practice was always to appraise independently and then share our views, and we are not always on the same page by a long way. This would usually lead to better work as we debated and proposed avenues for authors to explore. Gradually a shape and direction emerged to the series which was global in scope and which prioritised empirical work and much school-based curriculum policy and development largely across the global north and South East Asia. Again, this reflected trends in higher education at the time when neoliberal expansion of higher education into China was in its ascendancy, in particular. In the early days, as the series was still finding its feet, a

proposal was received which was energizingly different and un-European in feel and philosophy.

*Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-native Languages in West Africa*, stands out as different from the variations on the themes of intercultural competence, languages and education which dominated our series. Moradewun Adejunmobi, now Professor of African American and African Studies at the University of California, Davis, offered the series a stunning work of intercultural scholarship from the perspective of West African speech and popular culture (See Adejunmobi, 2004). That this has not become a default cited text in intercultural studies and education shows the extent to which even when the material conditions are put in place for publication by Black scholars from the South, and knowledge from and of the intercultural contexts of West Africa was offered for further development in a largely European context, scholars, students do not necessarily follow those threads at the time, but may come back to them in later years only to find the new concerns of an age well reflected in previous publications. Racism and the consumption of knowledge are intimately linked and take more than a publication in a series to overcome, or even changed citation practices. Structural and systemic problems require structural and systemic change of which series editing is a small part.

#### **Entente Cordial: Peace not War**

The forms of hegemonic zeal which consume a knowledge-hungry student body and inform decolonial student politics is one which Byram, I believe, was also keen to facilitate with his model of critical cultural awareness and his ‘savoir être’ – the knowing how to be, which has ethical valence for individual intercultural citizens in formation. If anything, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the aftermath of the Balkans war and genocide on the borders of the new European enlargements, a street politics of education seemed remote within the conditions of knowledge and theoretical developments of intercultural language education. There was a practical, steady, pragmatic peace-building task to hand – that of enabling multilingual and intercultural language education for Europe and beyond, into contexts with strong neoliberalising curricular development.

Byram’s work and models, with their stated ontological and critical dimensions, fitted perfectly into these contexts, and importantly into those of the post-Enlightenment European philosophical tradition, alongside that of American pragmatism and British empiricism. Having shared panel discussions and chaired debates with Mike Byram over two decades, it’s clear that one of his favourite, and often most exasperated answers to questions or to any critical impasses in a theoretical debates, would be, “that would be an empirical question.” The ability to test a hypothesis, develop an empirical knowledge based for theoretical pursuits is a vital part of his scholarship and for understanding how it developed. And as part of the material conditions enabling this empiricism and these debates comes European freedom of movement and European funding. Of course his work is that of a European scholar. He was working in the heyday of European Union scholarship, working with the Council of Europe to shape this to be fit for purpose within the context of ascendant neoliberal ideologies and the recourse to critique and to ontology as counterweights.

In November 1991 the General Conference of UNESCO invited the Director General “to convene an international commission to reflect on education and learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Similar to the commissioning of Lyotard’s earlier 1984 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, but less performative in its assessment of the directions for education (Lyotard, 1984) Jacques Delors submitted *Learning: The Treasure within* (Delors & et al., 1996). In it an outline was presented which was rooted in lifelong learning and a holistic and integrated vision of education based on the paradigms of lifelong learning. It included the four dimensions, each found in Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence framework, of learning to be, to know, to do, and to live together. In the introduction education is presented as ‘a necessary utopia’

In confronting the many challenges that the future holds in store, humankind sees in education an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice. As it concludes its work, the Commission affirms its belief that education has a fundamental role to play in personal and social development. (Delors & et al., 1996).

In many ways this was the pragmatic and empirical outworking of the revolutions in consciousness that had occurred through engagement with the work of Cultural Studies, the foregrounding of questions of cultural identity, race gender and class, the Birmingham School, and the consequences for mainstream education under neoliberal paradigms. Both the Delors report and the models Byram elaborated towards his 1997 publication were exceptional attempts to draw often incompatible political streams into a workable, education model that was fit for purpose for a system that had undergone a revolution across the global north.

In many ways the Delors report and the work Byram and his contemporaries and colleagues undertook through the 1990s onwards in their engagement with this work, is the equivalent of engagement today with the normative frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals. Fundamentally the questions were questions for peace time, and for a point in human history that pre-dated the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in the United States in 2001, and the ushering in of the war on terror and its consequences for any form of education for mutual flourishing and mutual respect, under new and diffuse conditions of warfare, and now cultural warfare. In 1997, cultural and intercultural education and dialogue were instrumental in the pursuance of a political of education for peace, with Byram’s work very much at the forefront of this particular moment.

Byram’s work also fits firmly into models of educational practice, and ways of doing scholarship which pre-date the SDGs in other ways too. In 1997, Erasmus and Tempus schemes were beginning to really show what enhanced mobility on a number of levels, across the dimensions of lifelong learning, might achieve. The decade following the 1997 publication saw scholars meeting, conferencing, researching and publishing together across the European Union and forging bonds many of which are still in evidence in work continuing today, and despite BREXIT. Entente Cordiale Scholarships between Britain and France began in 1995,

focusing on continuing the cordial relations between the two states, forged off the back of centuries of colonial territory disputes in 1904, but again revealing the political importance of French and of Europe in the 1990s.

The lens is European, not global, despite the later iterations and fits of models to global contexts. The scholarship is rooted in Enlightenment and European scholarship, critically. The work on decolonising of the 1980s and as part of postcolonial scholarship was largely unreflected in debates on education but confined to the work in literature and modern language departments (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Forsdick, 2005; Pratt, 1991, 2008(Forsdick, 2005). It takes time for theories to move through and into new disciplines, from deconstruction and decolonisation and its no surprise that its only now, in 2021, that the advocacy and activism of #BlackLivesMatters and decolonising higher education has begun to fuse with a seam of scholarship that has largely been located in history and literature and thought, not strongly within mainstream education outwith Europe.

### **Conflict, Conviviality, Conclusions**

Intercultural Communicative Competence, in the pursuance of personal and social development under the peace time conditions of Europe is a convivial goal. It locates politics in the personal and civic space but is nonetheless transformational in intent and also pragmatic in its non-revolutionary aims. Steady building up of education as formation with multicultural, multilingual experiences and societies can serve to create a citizenship with intercultural communicative competence over time. These people can meet, greet, work, play, love and also disagree in ways which will not produce the devastations of the past on European soil, and these may also then be lessons for others which the Common European Framework of Reference has now enabled, in part.

Questions of conviviality look very different when the world's conflicts are made proximate by both social media and mass displacements of people, when in the UK numbers seeking asylum since the 1997 publication have fundamentally altered and added to questions of intercultural communicative competence and brought questions of conflict centre stage. In her Nobel lecture Judith Butler (Judith, 2012) poses the new dilemma of care for lives which are more or less grievable in conflicts worldwide, but also the question of how it can be that citizens come to care about the fate of another who is not proximate, not an immediate neighbour or citizen but in a far off conflict, suffering and in need of both advocacy and attention. The politics of the second and third decades of the twenty first century, facilitated by technologies, are producing new questions of the place of education as a necessary utopia, of the limits to personal competence as a survival stratagem, and of the global and climate scope required of intercultural imagination and communication which takes leave of the immediately social and also brings the more than human world in as an addressee.

But at root, and what remains constant, from Byram's scholarship, as the world changes, is the clear focus on the empirical, the steady in the service of education that might lead to convivial ways of being similar and different, equal and also radically unequal but capable of dialogue.



The South African scholar Francis Nyamnjoh refers to education and higher education in particular as requiring conviviality, a state which is less bound and fraught with the distresses of the political and even environmental sphere:

[...] a convivial scholarship that dwells less on zero-sum games of absolute winners and losers, encourages a disposition of incompleteness and humility through the reality of the ubiquity of debt and indebtedness, and finds strength in themes of interconnections, interdependences, compositeness, and incompleteness [...]. (Nyamnjoh, 2019)

This would also be a fitting description of the methods of scholarship and nurturing of intercultural education scholars which many of us have experienced from Mike Byram's own work in the academy. It also allows us to begin again at a point in time where the terms 'intercultural' and 'competence' are beginning to sound dated and rather blunt from excessive use. Intercultural programmes are stagnating, and the world is talking of climate change, conflict, displacement and the covid pandemic. People cannot travel and sitting together is now a technological pursuit on Zoom and Teams and in the hands of Big Tech. Political power is dangerously dominated by politicians who have made an art out of not displaying any intercultural communicative competence at all, and fear grips and does its corrosive work.

What succeeds this moment in global human history is as yet unknown, but the seeds are sown in Byram's decentring scholarship and even more importantly in the holistic, ontological methods that persist. Santos has elaborated some critical trajectories for social and legal frameworks for this age, which he calls 'the coming of age of epistemologies of the south' (A. Phipps, 2007; Santos, 2014, 2018). He argues powerfully, and against the grain of the European traditions, for human scale thought, and also from within an engaged scholarship of social movements, for which the critical cognitive frameworks of three hundred years of European scholarship are inadequate. It's not an easy thing, looking at one's own scholarship on, for instance, the year abroad for language study in Europe, and to see it seemingly, from within UK higher education at least, discontinued and the scholarship rendered defunct, as has occurred for those of us who worked within the European project. Nor is Santos wrong to see certain approaches to knowledge as having run their course and needing to pause, take stock, philosophically, of new, material conditions. This is not a *tabula rasa* for intercultural scholarship, however, but rather the critical work of offering revised concepts and shaping a field anew. For Santos, there was a focus on concepts such as 'intercultural translation' and a move from thinking of Universities to 'pluriversities or subversities' as organising entities.

In Byram's 2008 monograph he focused on 'Intercultural Citizenship' (Byram, 2008) and concluded with a pragmatic agenda for education for citizenship sitting alongside that of language education. He is unapologetic about using 'Education' twice in the title of this book, and sees the steps for the decade following the 1997 publication as forging bonds between intercultural communicative competence and intercultural citizenship: 'a focus of citizenship education on the understanding and action involved when one is a member of an international society, especially an international civil society' (p. 229).

What the decade following the publication of this agenda for engagement in action has brought, has been a heightened awareness globally of what it means not to belong, not to be documented, not to have franchise, not to be included, or to be tolerated and included in such a way as to overburden and fetishize. Intercultural citizenship remains a Delorsian goal, a necessary education utopia, a vision for what seems to be an ever-receding future faced with the monumental challenges encapsulated by the Sustainable Development Goals, and COP26 meeting in Glasgow in November 2021.

But, and this but is part of holding fast to Byram's vision and agenda for engagement for intercultural citizenship, yesterday (May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021) the Scottish Parliament elections were held and following a long, engagement, multilingual campaign, voting rights were extended to refugees in Scotland. "It means we are considered part of the community" said refugees, who had learned English, and who have lived in Scotland for 14 years (<https://youtu.be/C2IbfGUmGUK>). Social media was full of reports and happy selfies from some of the 20,000 refugees able to vote for the first time, reporting feeling not just of being included but trusted, part of things, about to be exactly what Byram envisages – Intercultural Citizens.

It sometimes seems like an ever-receding future and a long way off, the vision and outworking of Byram's intercultural agenda, globally, but on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 it was also right here in Scotland, where I live, work, learn, act and educate, and it was made real.

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