

“I Need You To Accept My Word!”
Narrating Trauma Across Generations
In The District Six Museum And The Cape Town Holocaust Centre¹.
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Heritage sites such as the District Six Museum and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre are increasingly perceived as crucial educational spaces where the past is documented and the future symbolised and facilitated. How do museum facilitators, being primary or secondary witnesses to the Holocaust and apartheid’s forced removals, define and negotiate this process of transition in their pedagogical interactions? This paper looks at ways museum facilitators reflect on the process of reaching an ‘understanding’ in the pedagogical interactions with younger generations who visit the sites as part of their formal education. The paper suggests that this ‘generational dialogue’ entails a complex and unsettling negotiation of different kinds of ‘understanding’.

Introduction

Educators teaching about past atrocities claim that the younger generations have to remember and understand the stories that primary witnesses convey about atrocities so that these will never happen again. Simon *et al.* (2000) call this idea the pedagogical justification of remembrance. While this justification is rightly used and defended by many (including myself) it embodies an assumption about the moral vigilance of the young listener which is not unproblematic. In the words of Simon *et al.* (2000, p.5): ‘While the promise of remembrance is that of a moral vigilance that stands over and against indifference, the continuation of local and global violence suggests that such a pedagogy rarely serves as an effective safeguard’.

While educators make the above claim, they also stress that the younger generations struggle to or even cannot understand the trauma because

they did not experience it. The relationship between these two claims seems to be a paradox. Ellsworth (1997, pp.81-82) points to a possible explanation: educators (and human beings in general) have the desire to forget that 'the fancy of understanding' is a prestigious but seductive illusion. In other words both claims embody the assumption that there is a 'direct' and unquestioned relationship between 'understanding' and (positive) 'change' (see also Britzman, 2000; Jagodzinski, 2002 and Simon *et al.*, 2000). Ellsworth (1997, p.70) explains:

Teaching is not psychoanalysis. But consciously or unconsciously teachers deal nevertheless in repression, denial, ignore-ance, resistance, fear and desire whenever we teach. And in any classroom, the presence of the discourse of the Other can often become painfully and disturbingly evident and 'disruptive' to goals such as understanding, empathy, communicative dialogue. This is especially so in classrooms that deal explicitly with histories.

The first step then in untangling these seemingly contradictory claims and the process of 'understanding' and 'change' across generations is to pay attention to the perceptions of educators or 'mediators', be they teachers or museum facilitators. This paper aims to unpack different meanings museum facilitators allocate to 'understanding' in the generational dialogue that takes place in the heritage sites of the District Six Museum and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. Both museums were established during the first ten years of South Africa's democracy, are extensively visited by school groups and have developed lesson material and specific programs for schools.

In an attempt to understand what is going on 'in-between' the generational dialogue that takes place in the heritage sites, I make a distinction between primary narratives and secondary narratives. Primary narratives are narratives of the victims of the traumatic historical event. Secondary narratives are the narratives of secondary witnesses or commentators of the event. The latter not only include relatives of the

primary witnesses but also commentators and witnesses without a familial connection.

In addition, I understand 'dialogue' in a socio-historical way, namely as a space in which 'understanding' is not just a product or (desired) outcome, but also a process, joint activity or mediated practice (Bakhtin, 1981, pp.281-282). Even though both meanings – 'product' and 'process'- are sides of the same coin (Wells, 1999), I choose to use the phrase '*a practice of understanding*' to emphasise a more mediated and social meaning of 'understanding' (see Daniels, 2001) and to encourage a reflection on 'the difficult problems of hearing, understanding, and knowing' (Simon *et al.* 2000, p.6).

The data used in this paper entails reflections on a selection of interviews conducted in 2003, namely those interviews in which interviewees explicitly reflected on establishing an 'understanding' across generations. Julie Abrahams (*pseudonym*) and Henry Anderson (*pseudonym*) are two interviewees from the District Six Museum. Both lived in District Six and are thus perceived as primary witnesses. Mrs. Abrahams is a guide at the museum, while Mr. Anderson is one of the trustees. Paddy Berkovitch (*pseudonym*), Magda Goldberg (*pseudonym*) and Isabelle Lagrange (*pseudonym*) are three interviewees from the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. All of them play a part in the education program that the Centre offers. Isabelle Lagrange is a Holocaust survivor or primary witness, while Mrs. Berkovitch and Mrs. Goldberg are secondary witnesses and trained as teachers².

Understanding: A Social Act ...

Most of the interviewees question the possibility of understanding and imagining for those who did not experience the atrocities first hand. I had the following dialogue with Henry Anderson, one of the trustees of District Six Museum:

A: [...] the children don't and I can't exp/I don't know, I don't expect them to fully understand and appreciate, they can

read about it and they can say 'I hear what you're saying'.
But they CAN'T identify with it.

G: Why?

A: Because they've not experienced it! So what does it need now, is for them to know the HISTORY, and to accept when people TELL the [...] that when you are stripped of your humanity, this is what happens to you! Now I need you, if you are the/the student, I need you to accept my word!

G: To believe you.

A: To believe me! And to believe what other writers have written about hum/humankind's behaviour towards humans. OK? [...] And here understanding is linked to seeing, and hearing it, and also feel. And the best way is to be able to use a vehicle, use words, which could be a vehicle, use sounds, which could be a vehicle, use visuals, which could be a vehicle to help you [...] to transPORT yourself into that situation. And, and, and imagine that you are experiencing that pain, that hardship. It's not easy! It is not easy for the children, descendants of those, those parents, those grandparents who suffered forced removals to FULLY appreciate [their experiences] [...] They never lived here.³
(Henry Anderson)

Anderson says here that learners do not fully 'understand', 'appreciate', 'identify with' what the older generation went through because they did not experience it themselves. He states that they need to 'know' history, 'accept' his word and the words of others. 'Understanding' in this context is perceived as 'social'. In other words understanding is not only 'paradigmatic' 'knowing' but also means listening to the narratives of other people's experiences (Bruner, 1986, pp.11-43; Wells, 1999, pp.107-

108). In the words of Vygotsky (quoted in Egan and Gajdamaschko, 2003, pp.95-96):

We must not forget for a moment that both knowing nature and knowing personality is done with the help of understanding other people, understanding those around us, understanding social experiences. Speech cannot be separated from understanding. This inseparability of speech and understanding is manifested identically in both the social use of language as a means of communication and in its individual use as a means of thinking.

Anderson states that the learners can start to understand through the 'vehicle' of the senses (hearing, seeing, feeling) so that they can 'transport' themselves into other situations, '[imagining] that you are experiencing that pain, that hardship'. Anderson's reflection on what 'understanding' is in this generational dialogue brings out its complex, multidimensional character. As Bruner (1986, p.69), referring to David Krech, states it: 'people 'perfink' - perceive, feel and think at once. They also *act* within the constraints of what they 'perfink' (Bruner's emphasis).'

Understanding: Imagination and Empathy ...

One could say that high school learners, as secondary witnesses to past traumatic events can only try to imagine what it was like by placing themselves in the shoes of the narrators. Smith (2001, p.447) however warns that believing in possibilities and similarities can foreclose remembering that one forgets and imply accepting uncritically what the primary witness conveys (see also Young, 1988, pp.170-171). The request 'I need you to accept my word' can thus be answered in different, often paradoxical ways. This complexity can be understood by looking at the emotional impact of the traumatic experience which often expresses itself in an 'unwillingness' on both sides to 'understand' the narrative, to 'accept' its gaps and silences. Paddy Berkovitch, one of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre facilitators, says that the Centre asks the Holocaust survivors to testify only in some of the educational programs because of the emotional impact the act of testifying has on them. She states that

even when the survivors talk, listeners do not necessarily understand what they say:

[...] often that is also falling, almost, on deaf ears. Because the listeners haven't got the context, and therefore haven't even got the empathy. Unless you've done quite a bit of reading, you don't really know what they are talking about. Because they never talk worst case scenario. They give you an outline of what happened to them. And these people have no idea what the worst case scenario actually was. (Silence). And we also don't LIKE to expose them to st/, even to young people, who may not appreciate what they are talking about. [...] [They do] not empathise efficiently, you know, this, to them, to a very young person, this is an old person standing and talking about something that happened 60 years ago. OK and they don't REALLY understand what it is. (Paddy Berkovitch)

Paddy Berkovitch's reflection indicates that reaching an understanding is challenging because of the different historical positions and needs of both parties. Understanding needs a listener bringing in 'context' and 'empathy'. There is the assumption that learners might understand the agony, pain and also silences or gaps in the narratives of primary witnesses when they have 'done quite a bit of reading'. It is however not only what learners already 'know' that is important in the *practice of understanding*. Implicitly Berkovitch seems to refer also to the role of imagination in bridging what learners might read in books and what is left unsaid in the witness' narrative. Egan and Gajdamaschko (2003, pp.88-89) assert that learners' cognitive tools of their imaginative lives are part of their intellectual life and can offer ways to deal with 'the extremes and limits of reality'.

Understanding: Unsettlement ...

The complexity of 'empathy' however also incorporates the generational Other: the young generation looks upon the narrator as being 'an old

person', someone they do not understand, or maybe do not want to understand. Unwillingness is also part of the narrator: 'they never talk worst case scenario, they give you an outline of what happened to them', says Paddy Berkovitch. The atrocities they experienced were traumatic, not normal, and therefore difficult and painful to imagine, to understand and to convey. One could say that for the survivors of atrocities there is a thin line between remembering and imagining, and this brings with uncanniness and unsettlement (Kristeva, 1991, p.188). This uncanniness or unsettlement is also experienced by the listener. Human beings universally have the tendency not to think about or to build an emotional wall against painful experiences, also when these experiences are not theirs (Bauer, 2001, pp.40,262; McCully *et al.* 2002; Salmons, 2001).

Silences and gaps across generations also take place in the very homes of the learners. Julie Abrahams, a guide at the District Six Museum perceives her role in conveying her personal stories to children pivotal in this context:

[...] especially I like to share it with the small children, you know. (silence) because for them it is history, but yet if you make it personal and if you, um, to get their attention, um, for them to appreciate what people've gone through (silence) and to make them AWARE of the past, you know, for children, it is not, they don't have this experience of what we went through, [about] Apartheid and so on. Because I think their parents don't talk about it with them. There MIGHT be some parents, but the majority of parents are so, um, stressed by work and family and so on. So they don't have much time, to spent with their children and talking about the past. And, so, um (silence) I [can] make it interesting for them um, you know, [if] they will appreciate it, or maybe, maybe get some sense of understanding. (Julie Abrahams)

Understanding: Extension and Re-interpretation ...

While uncanniness and 'misunderstandings' might be experienced as restraining and even threatening, they also open a door to what Lacapra calls 'empathic unsettlement' 'in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own' (LaCapra, 2001, p.40). Empathic unsettlement provides a 'remembrance as a difficult return' (Simon *et al.* 2000) instead of the redemptive myth that the future will be better if one remembers. 'Learning' through 'empathetic unsettlement' happens on two 'levels': on the one hand, one learns about what happened to others, in another time and space. On the other hand, one learns 'within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending these events' (Simon *et al.* 2000, p.3). According to Schlender (2002, p.138) 'estrangement' plays a crucial role in this context: One willingly and unwillingly estranges the experiences of oneself or another human being. In the words of Jagodzinski (2002, p.xlviii): 'It is important that trauma has to be understood not only in its most dramatic and tragic forms (i.e. loss of a loved one, the horror of war neurosis, a disabling accident, etc.) but also as a pedestrian experience where an unexpected, unanticipated, and seemingly unexplainable event occurs.'

I perceive this interpretation of 'empathic unsettlement' as crucial in the *practice of understanding*. Too often people working in education and heritage sites, make an unquestioned, explicit link between 'knowing about atrocities' and 'not enacting atrocities in the future' while implicitly assuming that the listener bears certain moral values which ensure this link (Simon *et al.* 2000). 'Estrangement' and the tension between 'wanting to know' and 'not wanting to know' amongst secondary witnesses are often overlooked. Isabelle Lagrange, a Holocaust survivor, and Magda Goldberg, a secondary witness working at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, however point at the possible hope-giving role of time in constructing a *practice of understanding*:

It is VERY interesting to know WHAT they come up with. So HOPEfully, even if maybe at the moment it is not the most important thing in their lives, later on, you know, they won't forget about it. Cause I think once you have seen it, you can't

go forget about it. So it is very important they've seen. Especially if they are living in a country like South Africa. (SG: yes) So it is very important. And if I didn't feel it is important, I wouldn't be doing it, you know. Because it is not a pleasure (SG: no). You know, it is not a pleasure to talk about all these things. (Isabelle Lagrange)

I, I often wonder what happens when some of these children go home and [...] they come with these new ideas, how the parents react you know. [...] It's probably hard to go home and say, 'well how was it at the Holocaust Centre today?' I mean teaching X Y Z and we're teaching them Z Y X, you know how, 'I don't want to be disrespectful to my parents but' (silence) it's HARD, it's very hard but maybe even if it doesn't happen then, it happens at another point in time but they, ja, might just remember what happened. (Magda Goldberg)

What learners take from the generational dialogue is as important as what they bring to it (Wells, 1999, pp.90-92). Both Lagrange and Goldberg express the hope that learners learn and take on another view on the past but also their own present lives. This brings estrangement and uncanniness, not only because it implies remembering what is 'not a pleasure' but also what parents might not want to share. Understanding then does not only require 'primary experience' but also extension and re-interpretation (Bakhtin, 1981; Hexter, 1971; Wells, 1999; Wineburg, 2001). It implies taking on another world view. It implies changing attitudes and actions. And this takes time, and willingness.

Conclusion

In this paper I make an attempt to unpack different meanings museum facilitators allocate to 'understanding' in the generational dialogue that takes place in the heritage sites of the District Six Museum and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. I suggest that this 'generational dialogue' entails a complex and unsettling negotiation of different kinds of 'understanding', which can be summarised as follows: 'Understanding' in the context of

these two museums is about experiencing, conveying and listening to past atrocities. 'Understanding' is social, involves imaginative empathy and is disruptive. It entails not only a 'paradigmatic' knowing, it entails also a listening to other people's narratives. It entails practices of imagining, but also of forgetting and 'not wanting to know' what is said and/or what is left unsaid by the generational Other. This generational Other may be the primary witness learners meet in the museum; it can be the young people with whom the older generations try to talk; it can be the parents of these learners; it can be the children of the older generations. Lastly, 'understanding' is not just about (first or second hand) 'experiencing', it demands extension and re-interpretation. It entails the realisation that the reality of the generational Other differs from one's own and that one might have to take on another position or world view to understand this Other. I want to argue that by perceiving 'understanding' as a *practice*, one acknowledges not only the meandering of 'understanding'. One also potentially offers a hopeful alternative for the illusion of total(-itarian) understanding, in which 'the future' is pregnant with never ending new possibilities in which 'the Other' within and without is in the process of being understood.

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² These interviews form part of a larger project in which I interviewed five facilitators in the District Six Museum and seven facilitators in the Cape Town Holocaust Centre on the mediation of traumatic memories to younger generations. Of this larger group, all District Six Museum interviewees lived in District Six and two of the Holocaust Centre interviewees are Holocaust survivors.

³ Transcription conventions used are: '(silence)' stands for pauses taken by the narrator. '[...]' are editing and cutting interventions by the author. Words in capital indicate that the narrator raises his/her voice.