

Anders gemeinsam – gemeinsam anders? IN AMBIVALENZEN LEBENDIG KOMMUNIZIEREN

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TCI Goes to the Grassroots

Workshop with Participants from Nigeria, Morocco, Taiwan, India, Germany and Austria

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Introduction

As an example of best practice of "Living Communication in the Ambivalence of the Present" we worked on experiences with Theme-Centered-Interaction (TCI) at the grassroots level (in India). This provoked a situation of storytelling within the very international and intercultural group. How can TCI be used in very different and ambivalent contexts to go to the grassroots? What ambivalences rise in doing so? How has it to be "adapted" and not "adopted"? What ambivalences arise if Ruth Cohn's concept with the deep anthropological and ethical foundation in humanistic psychology comes into the context of traditional Indian wisdom with deep spiritual roots?¹ How could TCI in India be an example for "good practice" in a new and ambivalent cultural and religious context in general?

The challenge of the workshop in general was to discover ambivalences in TCI communication in different cultural and religious contexts as well as in grassroots work in specific contexts. The workshop ended with a lot of questions which are likely to arise if we really touch the grassroots level in a transformative way like TCI does. In this report we have to concentrate on the Indian experiences.

1 From Conference Hall to Panackachira Village

Since 15 years there are yearly big TCI conferences (mostly with more than 200 participants) in India. At the 10th Annual Conference I (Matthias) was invited to give a keynote on "TCI Goes to the Grassroots"². The conference did not begin as usual in a big conference hall. It began in a small village with the name Panackachira. Hardly anyone in India will know this small village.

¹ See ABRAHAM, THOMAS, TCI and Indian Wisdom. Towards a Concordance, in: International Journal of Theme-Centred Interaction Inaugural Issue (2006) 17-29.

² See SCHARER, MATTHIAS, Panackachira - a Symbol of Socially conscious revitalization of TCI India and International. Companions on the way to the Grass Roots, in: Indian Journal of Theme-Centred Interaction 6/7 (2010) 95-104.

I did know the village from two visits some years before³. During my first visit I was allowed to participate in an assembly of leaders of the village. Most of what was spoken I couldn't understand. But what I could understand very well was the group dynamic in this assembly. Someone introduced – like we do in TCI – an important theme for the village. After this everyone was invited to comment. The voice of everybody was accepted. After this the participants went in small groups to work out specific aspects of the theme. At last the leader gave a short summary.

1.1 In the House of Sheela and Her Family

In this assembly one woman, named Sheela, and her husband had been very active. They couldn't speak a single English word but I could feel the engagement. When I came back for the second time into the village with a small group of Austrian and German participants of the Master Course in Communicative Theology, I was invited along with Thomas to stay overnight in the house of Sheela and her family. As I remember we went into a room where the animals were nearby which produced warmth for our meeting. This scenery was familiar to me because I was born in a very poor farmhouse in which we used the warmth of animals in winter to wash ourselves near them. Without any English word we could communicate very well and intensively. Sheela is so sensitive that she could feel also my religious impact. So when it came to an end of our conversation she took "her" book with Hindu prayer. I don't know if she could read it. But she began a wonderful song in her own Hindu rite. After she told us that she will sing every Friday at the Hindu temple and people give her some small money. This she invests in educating the children.

1.2 TCI Workshop in Front of Sheelas House

With these insights into the real life of Sheela (unfortunately her husband died a few years later) I came back to the beginning of the 10th Annual Conference. Three Europeans (Karin Fritsche, Germany; Teresa Peter and me, Austrian) facilitated a very provoking kind of TCI workshop in front of Sheelas house. It was really an ambivalent "new practice" of TCI very far from European benchmarks.

³ See ABRAHAM, THOMAS, TCI goes to the Grass roots, in: Indian Journal of Theme-Centred Interaction 5 (2009) 59-65.

More than 30 women and a few men from the neighborhood came together. A meal was prepared for afterwards. We were informed that most of the men are working outside and therefore came back late. The group was so big that not all could sit in a circle. There were also a lot of children playing around their mothers. In our European understanding it would be impossible to facilitate concentrated TCI group work within such a setting. The ambivalence between the needs of TCI group-work and the reality of day-to-day life in the village was obvious.

1.3 How TCI Helps Us in Our Daily Life?

After welcoming us one of the women introduced a theme like "How TCI helps us in our daily life in our village". She gave a short biographical narrative how her life was before TCI and how it is after. One sentence of this woman I will always keep in my mind: "Before TCI I asked my husband for every step I did. TCI did help me to be aware on my chairperson. Step by step I began to live my life with my own decisions and also my husband is happier with this." After this helpful theme introduction to which all were listening very attentively, loud conversations began within the group. Everyone wanted to share her own story. Without much organization, small groups with three to five came together. We could see that they were used to building small groups. After this the plenum took place. Every small group shared examples of how TCI helped to manage the day-to-day life of these mostly very poor people. They organized Self Help Groups to manage their daily expenses. The longer the meeting lasted the more men did attend the meeting. They were invited to tell about their hard work through the week. Most of them were away from family during the whole week. But now it was Friday evening and they came back. They told about the history of their struggle. Panckachira is a village in central Kerala in South India. This village came into existence in 1971 when 300 landless families were re-habilitated here. Previously they were living on the sides of roads in the nearby town. The newly settled families had lots of problems to cope with, no proper houses, no school, no hospital and above all no opportunities for work.

2 Shifting Paradigms

The local government and several non-governmental organizations came forward to help these poor people. When we look at the helping process that has taken place in the village we can see several shifting paradigms.

1. Social service paradigm. This is the alms giving model which was unavoidable in the miserable 70's. Government offered a subsidized scheme to provide minimum shelter. The Catholic Church, with foreign support, offered "food for work".
2. Social work paradigm. The emphasis in the late 1970's and the 80's shifted to community organization for promoting economic independence. If you give a person a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him how to fish, then you feed him for a life-time. This was the new focus.
3. Social action paradigm. This was for conscientizing the poor to organize themselves to put pressure on the government to get their rightful demands met. Obviously the socio-economic structures in the village were anti-poor.
4. Socio-economic empowerment paradigm. This happened around the turn of the century. Following the model of Grameen Bank of Bangladesh we formed Self Help Groups (SHGs) for the socio-economic empowerment of the people. In each SHG there were about 15 members – mostly women. They came all from the same neighborhood and had a similar economic background. They started small savings and started getting small bank loans for income generation.

I (Thomas), who first entered the village in 1979, have been accompanying the village since then. I met TCI in 1994. My journey with TCI merged with his continuing association with Panackachira. I started visualizing Panackachira village as a "learning community". The leaders of the Self Help Groups co-operated.

3 Defining "Learning Community"

Inspired by the TCI dictum that true learning involves personal change, the village leaders sat together to define what it means to be a learning community. They arrived at the following dimensions.

1. Self empowerment (which is at the psychological level). I can, if I think I can. Change has to begin at the level of attitudes.
2. Empowering relationships in the family and at the level of SHGs and neighborhoods.
3. Continual learning, particularly through classes and seminars and reading of books. (Fortunately the literacy level is high.)
4. Living in harmony with nature. The village has some forests adjoining it, and during the period of severe poverty, the people used to go into the

forest to cut down trees violating the government rules. Gradually the people started realizing the need for conservation of nature.

These four dimensions coincided with Ruth Cohn's four factor model. The participants in the Innsbruck workshop were quick to realize it.

4 From Couch to Circle to Community

Ruth Cohn had the clear conviction that TCI is not merely for the clinic or for the workshop, but for the community. She argued that "We must reach out ... to the multitude of distraught people who are wishing and seeking for ways to master themselves rather than be destroyed by delinquent youths, criminal adults, psychopathic riflemen, national and international temper tantrums and nuclear explosions."⁴

Matthias at this point intervened and led the group to reflect on where TCI is as far as its use in Europe is concerned. What do we learn as we go to the grassroots with TCI?

Thomas Abraham shared that, as a TCI-inspired and TCI-empowered community organizer he learned many valuable lessons.

1. One is about the process of sustainable social change. It has to begin with the "I", that is, the people in the community have to begin to look at themselves as individuals. They have to discover themselves, discover their passion and purpose. Very often the community organizer puts emphasis on the task forgetting that empowerment is fundamentally self empowerment.
2. The second insight is about trust in the people. The community organizer has to realize that nobody is "useless" but most people are "used less". This is a matter of giving the reverence that is due to every living thing. If the approach is good, the response is also likely to be good. People are not to be seen as a crowd. Each individual is unique.
3. The third insight is that the community as well as the community organizer needs to be aware of the globe. They have to be also aware of the fact that the socio-political structures that they see around them are expandable (and demolishable).

⁴ COHN, RUTH, From Couch to Circle to Community, in: KUBBEL, MARY ANNE / ABRAHAM, THOMAS C. (Hg.), *Living Learning. A Reader in Theme-Centered Interaction*, Kottayam 2009, 84.

4. The fourth insight is about the mission. Every human being is here to fulfill a unique mission. Our first task is to discover this mission. When we are inspired by this mission all our limitations break their bounds.
5. TCI enhances the social capital of the have-nots. When one woman is unwell and is unable to go for work, the women in the self-help group come forward to cook food for her as well as to take care of her children. Her husband will have to go to work, otherwise the family will starve and also there will not be the money to buy medicine for the ailing wife.
6. Those who came to leadership roles in the Panackachira learning community have shared one thing: they are not programmed by some higher-ups to carry out their dictates. These smaller leaders can exercise their chairpersonship. There is the fresh air of internal democracy.
7. "If everything were easy, how would I have become who I am today?" This is the opening line of a TCI poem that became popular in the village. This enabled them to accept the globe as it is, and to be positive about the possibilities of expanding it.

In the closing session of the workshop every participant got a chance to share their feelings and thoughts.