

Committee IV  
Crises in Education in the 1980's:  
A Survey of Educational Values  
and Systems

Draft  
For conference  
distribution only

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

by

**Anatol Pikas**  
Professor in Educational Psychology  
University of Uppsala, Sweden

on

**Dr. V. Selvaratnam's**

**THE INTERNATIONAL FLOW OF SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS:  
A VEHICLE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING,  
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Thirteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Washington D.C. September 2-5, 1984

© 1984, Paragon House Publishers

**How to Make the International Flow of Scholars and Students  
A Vehicle for Cross-Cultural Understanding?**

Comments on Dr. Selvaratnam's paper

by

Anatol Pikas  
University of Uppsala, Sweden

The question-mark at the end of the title of the paper of Dr. Selvaratnam initiates a doubt: does the International Flow of Scholars and Students really work as an incentive to achieve the words of honour: Understanding, Cooperation and Development?

The source of the flow of students is, according to Dr Selvaratnam, the international market economy. However, the phenomenon itself is a vehicle for the development of cross-cultural ties and hence for an understanding of important values across nations. Dr. Selvaratnam points out in the final section of his paper the obstacle to this plausible flow: the trend in the industrialized countries towards educational protectionism. He ends with a recommendation to take cognisance of this in fora like ours and try to avert it before further contradictions and tensions develop.

As a discussant I have no major disagreement with the goal stated and with the means indicated. There is no other way to increase understanding than to deal with the process of understanding itself. We have an opportunity here and now to get involved in this process which also means maintaining the absolute common values our conference is about.

What are the characteristics of a process of understanding which would create International Cooperation and Global Development?

It is important to stress that the first necessary characteristic is **symmetry in communication**. By this I mean reciprocity and equality in influencing information. You may observe that there also exists **asymmetric** understanding. When a scientist studies a germ under a microscope it is quite evident and recognized that his understanding of the germ is completely asymmetric. However, the same relationship is prevalent in most of our behavioural sciences: human cultures, groups and individuals are the objects of study of our antropologists, sociologists and psychologists without symmetric interaction between the scientist and his object.

As scientists we have inherited from our education an asymmetric approach which is an obstacle to communication for symmetric understanding. I would stress once more: the criterion "mutuality" is not enough because there can also exist an asymmetric mutuality.

The second characteristic of a process which would increase understanding for international cooperation and global development is **constructivity**. By this we mean building up common positive values and materials. The criterion for "constructivity" is that the parties themselves agree that such constructivity exists in their interaction. You may observe that there exists also an asymmetric constructivity: the case when a benevolent power is involved in a constructive development with a protegee.

The qualities symmetry and constructivity need not to be mentioned ostentatively if they are present in international understanding in a self evident manner. If they are, however, missing we need them as conceptual tools for changing undesired relations.

The issue now is: how dependent is symmetric constructive communication on market forces? The power of the economy is evident. It **may** be true that this is the most powerful force regulating the international flow of scholars and students. What is maintained here is that the economic factors are **not** the **only** ones regulating that flow.

What are the others? To deal with this question goes beyond my task as discussant. I would here emphasise one. In accordance with the main line in Dr Selvaratnam's paper I maintain that the need in human beings for understanding is an urgent independent force behind the flow we are discussing. But what happens when a researcher trained according to the usual asymmetric paradigms studies "international

understanding"? When he comes from an industrialized country his product tends to be asymmetric and so happens also for researchers from underdeveloped countries trained in the tradition of industrialized countries. The so called participant observation is seldom a remedy to escape from the asymmetry. The observer who is not himself observed and the observations of him which are not played back to him and not influencing common decisions and goals remain just quite simply asymmetric.<sup>1</sup>

Symmetric constructive communication I am trying to develop breaks with the asymmetric heritage in behavioural sciences. But how is this carried out quite concretely?

As Dr Selvaratnam's paper seems to me indicate a need of developing discussion technologies I would shortly present a general model for meetings applicable to situations where the different sides have "symmetry" and "constructivity" at least vaguely implied as working concepts in aiming at mutual understanding. This model is developed together with the subjects. First in small American-Swedish groups of students instructed "to go beyond the 'how nice to see you level'" and later in different international settings, the most challenging ones being small group meetings between Western and Soviet Russian representatives. I have isolated five steps in the process which leads to that kind of symmetrical understanding we have been talking about. Each of them is in itself a banality. Only together do they make a tool when guided by "the law of maturity of the previous step". This means that we shall not go on to the next step before there is a symmetric and corroborated meaning that the previous step has been achieved.

All these steps, as well as all organizational matters even should be discussed by the parties in advance. They are the following:

1. The participants get to know each other as individual human beings. They live and take their meals together. They talk about personal things but not about politics during this step.

---

<sup>1</sup>A study of international student exchange which seems to come closest to the ideals of symmetry and constructivity is the one co-ordinated by the European Institute of Education and Social Policy (51, rue de la Concorde, B-1050 Bruxelles, Belgium). In its research on international programs feedback from the object of the study--the students and professors--is continuously passed on to the administrators.

2. The participants talk about common values from a personal point of view. Among these values there are also values of peace. At this stage, no controversial values are discussed.

3. The participants explain to each other in personal terms their political identities and listen carefully to identity declarations from the other side.

4. The participants engage in constructive confrontations. This is the peak of the meeting. If the earlier steps have been fulfilled, they have created an accepting atmosphere which makes it possible to bring up controversial issues in a truth-seeking manner. The participants do not expect "complete understanding". Sometimes big differences are revealed. Sometimes aha-experiences occur which change negative attitudes and dissolve misunderstandings. Both sides must approach the problems in a symmetric way: if we expect that the other side should take up our reproaches in a constructive way, we have to take up theirs in the same way.

5. Common conclusions are drawn as an answer to the question: what have we learned from each other? How can we continue later on? This last stage is not only intended for summarizing results and future perspectives; it provides a therapeutic safety-valve in case the previous step has revealed painful differences in conceptions of peace.

The dynamics of these steps, if properly followed, preserve the spiritual independence of the participants. Understanding the other side does not undermine the identity of the participants—a process we are afraid of when caught into an asymmetric relationship.