

Remembering for the future: Gender as a topic of history and remembrance

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Our biographies are shaped by history – every person is in her/his diversity a historical person. This becomes visible through biographical work and was the basic assumption of our workshop.

Objectives

Working with a biographical and experiential approach in a group visualizes the diversity and multiple perspectives on the past. This was the first objective of the workshop. The second was to widen the perspective on own remembrance for gender dimensions.

By comparing these levels of remembrance questions were raised:

Who tells and defines history? Where do we get our knowledge about history from? Is *history* actually including *herstory*?

Methods

Learning through dialogue and dialogue through mutual learning is our central educational idea. For us dialogue is the opportunity to meet and learn from each other in a constantly changing world. Therefore we connect with methods of the Brazilian “liberator_y educator” Paulo Freire aiming to encourage emancipation and dialogue. Just like Freire, we assume that every woman and every man is expert of her/his own life. Everybody has the ability to discover, reflect on, create and change the own living context. Education - in our understanding - is the capability for self-dependent and self-conscious action within a community.

1. The story of my name

The workshop began with a simple round of introductions. Everybody was asked to tell the story of his/her name. Who gave the name to them and why? We learned why some names were popular or

unusual to certain times and countries. In that way the diversity of historical-biographical positioning of the participants' families are already slightly revealed.

2. Timeline

For the introduction to the topic of history and remembrance we used different timelines showing different sources of remembrance.

First step

Together we found out the birth year of the oldest person personally known by someone in the group. This date of birth was written down on a prepared wall paper with two timelines and marked the starting point of our historical knowledge of "told" history.

Second step

The participants noted on the upper timeline historical events coming to their mind spontaneously. On the lower timeline participants were asked to write down one story from the past (in keywords) that has been told by someone in their family.

Reflection

Looking at the developing collection of past events, we asked ourselves:

- * Where did I get the knowledge about these historical events from?
- * What differences or similarities do we notice between the historical events and the ones that were told in my family?

The collection visualizes different levels of remembrance, for which we offered two describing terms:

1. *Collective memories* (upper timeline): A group of people (can be family, society as well as a working group) share a common knowledge about the past
2. *Communicative memories* (lower timeline): Generations living together (more or less) share a certain pool of individual memories, which are told to each other and both the story as well as the telling have a specific emotional meaning to us.

3. Told Stories

Subsequent to the timeline activity the participants split in small groups of three. Each person now had the chance to share one story about the past, which was told to her/him in the family.

Phase 1

Sharing: Who told you the story and what is it about?

Phase 2

We tried to analyse the shared stories by three questions aiming at visualizing gender-dimensions in the told stories: What roles, social conditions, obligations, self-definitions, ideas of masculinity and femininity become visible through the story and the way it was told to you?

Plenary reflection

Back together participants reflected on the work in their small groups:

How did they feel telling the stories? Could they remember easily or was it hard to recall a story?

Then we focused on the gender aspects that became visible in the shared stories - in the past as well as in the reconstruction of remembrance.

In order to systematize the discovered gender aspects we used Reimann's Gender-Triangle - an analytic instrument for gender dimensions.

Follow up

The next step that we could not realize during the workshop - due to time constraints - would be to ask:

Which role do I take in the construction of history and remembrance? How this role was influenced by stories told in my family?

Evaluation of the workshop

Benefits

By engaging in dialogue on own experiences, these experiences can be reflected and become a source of knowledge. Reflection on experiences of someone else can allow us to see things differently and develop a sense of our own and other perceptions of history. The more people learn from each other's settings the more empathy is possible. And this is a crucial step in civil conflict management.

What does that mean in regard of the methodology – in other words which obstacles might appear?

Obstacles

To enable a dialogue-cognisant perception of each other requires the ability and willingness to listen. Am I able to respond to the participants or trainers? This might be a question of acceptance and power relations within the group which can be based on articulation and language skills, age or career of the group members.

Furthermore a lack of confidence can constrain the process. Telling something meaningful, that often has to do with personal experiences and emotions, can be difficult or might be a risk to be confronted with unexpected outcomes. Developing a confidential atmosphere often takes time.

Additionally, the experiential approach might be considered as unfamiliar or non-professional for it doesn't offer closed concepts and universally valid answers, rather than enable participants to receive another perspective on their own experience.

Conclusion

Working with a concept of pedagogy as an open process, that has no defined outcome but rather the aim of raising new topics and new questions, is often a risk. The above mentioned obstacles motivated us to create over and over again opportunities and space for a dialogue on the basis of equality, mutual listening and confidence to change perspectives. This is the starting point of our endeavour that we understand as a positioning in society.