

# **Principles and Practices of Development Education**

Autumn Term 2011

## **Assignment 2**

### **Questioning or reproducing binaries?**

#### **A critical reflection on “western” and “indigenous” perspectives in the “Through other Eyes” project**

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## 0. Introduction

The development education online resource “Through other Eyes” (TOE)<sup>1</sup>, designed by global education Professor Vanessa Andreotti and critical literacy Professor Lynn Mario de Souza, aims to help “learning to read the world”. The authors’ conception of global education is based on post-colonial theory (Andreotti 2006, Andreotti 2007, more specifically on TOE: Andreotti and De Souza 2008), which “involves [...] abandoning Darwinian narratives of progress for an openness to learning from other ways” (Brydon in Andreotti 2006:7). This should be achieved through a critical unlearning of interiorized ways of seeing the world in order to learn to live with uncertainty, complexity and multiple perspectives or worldviews. However, there is the danger that the underlying colonial binary between “western” oppressors and “indigenous”<sup>2</sup> oppressed perpetuates through the learning process in a reversed sense: The critical deconstruction of a normative progress based “western” worldview, might lead - though not being intended – to a normative elevation of “indigenous” knowledge.

Indeed, TOE seems to navigate in many parts on the basis of a binary between “indigenous” and “western” perspectives and knowledge: Dominant, colonially charged “western” perspectives are questioned, “indigenous” perspectives are implicitly presented as positive, and in harmony with nature and fellow humans. The authors recognize, discuss and justify this dichotomy largely, for example in related academic background material (Andreotti et.al. 2008) or the “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) section of the website<sup>3</sup>. However, from a learner’s perspective, I observed a *de facto* replacement of one generalization (positive view on progress and “western” style development) with another one (positive view on holistic, “indigenous” world view and life style). Considering that Andreotti et.al. claim to address “complexity, uncertainty, and contingency of knowledge construction” (2008:26), it seems problematic to create such an impression on the learner, in particular in a resource that aims to “deconstruct binaries” (2008:31).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> The terms „indigenous“ and “western” are written in quotation marks, as no clear definition of these terms and the groups of people they refer to is provided in the TOE resource. Sometimes the terms “Southern” or “Northern” are used which seem to be similarly unclear categories. See also reflections on complexity in part 3 of this paper and Young (2010) on the general problem of “North-South” categories in development education.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk/faq.php>

This paper will take a closer look on the conflict between the supposed deconstruction and, in my view, the *de facto* reconstruction of cultural and moral binaries, and the possible fault lines that lead to this impression, despite the stated opposite intention of the authors.

## 1. The analytical framework

I will analyse “Through other Eyes”, and in particular the aspect of a “North-South” dichotomy, regarding three aspects of quality in development education:

- **Process quality**, in particular through the following aspects:
  - Definition of target group
  - Formulation of aims
  - Reflectivity in the planning process
- **Content quality**, in particular through:
  - Dealing with complexity
  - Handling multiple perspectives
  - Facilitation of thinking in alternatives
- **Methodical quality**, in particular through:
  - Target group orientation
  - Diversity of methods
  - Handling participation

These categories are inspired by the discussion paper “Quality Criteria in Development Education” by the education working group of the German NGDO platform VENRO (VENRO 2011). It is the result of a collective reflection and drafting process of several months, which included national and international resources and expert input on quality in development education.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Background information on the VENRO work on DE quality is available here: [http://venro.org/qualitaet\\_wirkung.html](http://venro.org/qualitaet_wirkung.html)

A list of references is available here: [http://venro.org/qualitaet\\_wirkung\\_workshop.html](http://venro.org/qualitaet_wirkung_workshop.html)

## 2. Process quality:

Process quality is the first pillar for quality in development education resources, according to VENRO's quality framework. It looks at the coherence, effectiveness, transparency and connectivity of the planning and implementation process. Let's have a look at three aspects related to the question of binaries in TOE.

What is the **target group** of the project? While the website claims that the resource has been used in various educational contexts, including adult education, language classes and higher education, TOE aims particularly at "student teachers in England", a choice based on "funding and practical constraints" (TOE FAQ). Andreotti et.al. (2008:33) point out that the target audience would be "teachers and student teachers with limited knowledge about development or colonialism". The resource seems to be designed for users who have a knowledge deficit on development or colonialism – people with an uncritical progress based universalistic view on development, which can progressively be deconstructed. However, the fact that anyone can subscribe to the free online course results in a substantial heterogeneity of the target group<sup>5</sup>, that might lead to unexpected experiences in the learning process. Someone who has already doubts about growth based development might perceive certain proposed reflections and exercises as simplistic. While content- and methodical aspects will be discussed later in this paper, we can retain that the resource is designed for the ideal type of white, English, uncritical, unaware but well-meaning (doing this online course, after all) student teacher. Participants with other profiles (i.a. non-European participants) might experience the course not adapted to their needs. While this is to a certain degree unavoidable, it is regrettable that the target group (at least for the unaccompanied online course) is not stated more explicitly, which could contribute to preventing false expectations.

What is the **aim** of the project? TOE aims to "support educators to develop a set of tools to reflect on their own knowledge systems and to engage with other knowledge systems in different ways" (Andreotti et.al. 2008:23). This critical literacy should unfold by deconstructing past and on-going colonial oppression, and through valorizing "indigenous" ways of seeing the world. This is a noble mission, and Paulo

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<sup>5</sup> A sample examination of the learning journal contributions by country in unit 1.6 gave the following picture: IE 35, FI 15, UK 14, BR 13, CZ 13, NZ 9, SA 2, ZA, ES, CA, LT, JM, MX, US, IN each 1. Being explicitly designed for an English audience, contributions from UK count only 13% in this sample. 16% of contributions come from participants from so-called developing countries.

Freire (1995), fervent defender of an explicitly political role of the educator, would have suggested putting this “utopia” at the very frontline of the resource. A possible increase of appreciation for “indigenous” knowledge, to the expense of “western” knowledge – a shift in the binary balance – could be more critically reflected by the learner if this “moral mission” would be stated more explicitly. However, TOE doesn’t state it’s political utopia clearly but rather insists on the learning process as such, which should empower the learner to deconstruct his or her assumptions in a permanent circle of unlearning and learning.

The **planning process**, as far as it can be observed through the available sources, contains important elements of reflectivity, including the involvement of a non-European (“indigenous”) expert group, whose members also seem having provided quoted viewpoints in the “learning to listen” part of the resource. Furthermore, an advisory board of mostly European educators, academics and activists acted as “critical friends” to the project. Thus, a broad range of various perspectives and expertise could be included in the project development. However, Andreotti et.al. (2008:33) chose to attribute quite different roles to “western” and “indigenous” advisors: “Our decision [...] was to consult indigenous participants in relation to how their voices were represented in the resource, but not involve them in the educational design of the resource”, whereas the “western” experts were consulted on methodological questions, but had a limited say on issues of representation. Regarding the critical discussion of the use of binaries which is the topic of this paper, this set up of roles seems problematic in two ways:

- It implies that the issues of representation of “indigenous” people should be primarily based on the point of view of “indigenous” experts, whereas their representativity for such an indefinable group as “the indigenous” remains unclear.
- On the other hand, “indigenous” participants not having a say on the educational process, implies that this task is better left to the “western” experts, who supposedly know the education system and target group better – an element particularly problematic considering the important percentage of non-European participants (see footnote 5).

Different profiles of experts certainly lead to different competences regarding the various elements of a complex resource as TOE, and it seems reasonable to value these in a differentiated manner. From the available sources it is not observable how the feedback and consultation process was concretely organized (e.g. if there were two distinct groups of “indigenous” and “western” experts with separated communication channels). The critical discussion of “minefields” by the authors however suggests that the above-mentioned roles were attributed to the two types of experts in a collective manner. It would not be surprising if this “background binary” within the planning process shined through to the actual resource.

### 3. Content quality:

According to the second pillar in the analytic framework we will have a closer look on content related elements, namely the aspects of complexity, multiple perspectives and thinking in alternatives.

VENRO (2011) suggests that an educational resource should illustrate and reduce **complexity** of global processes while avoiding over-simplification and reinforcement or creation of stereotypes. The complexity of identities is a prominent topic in the “Methodology” section<sup>6</sup> of TOE, where the complex and fluid process of social (re-) construction is illustrated through various hands that “write” one’s identities. However, the outlined complexity of both “indigenous” and “western” groups and perspectives remains limited: the introduction material<sup>7</sup> proposes to “engage with indigenous knowledge” while acknowledging that the only thing they would have in common was “a distinctive connection [...] to the process of colonialism”: The group of “indigenous” people is defined in opposition to “the colonizers”. This seems problematic not only regarding the negative and victimizing perspective on this group (they only exist as a group because of the fact of being colonized), but it leaves also out various other groups that have been colonized, but which are implicitly (e.g. through the choice of “indigenous” testimonials in the resource) not included, such as various European people, who experienced colonization (Poles, Irish, ...) or people and territory colonized by non-Western powers (Tibet, Central-Asia, Darfur, West-

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk/method.php>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk/images/docs/toeintro2.pdf>

Sahara..). A certain reduction of complexity in order to being able to read the world is not only necessary, but also a quality feature for an educational resource. Nevertheless, the opposition between “western” and “indigenous” knowledge provoked also critical reactions from the advisory group to the project. “Northern” project partners asked to emphasize heterogeneity and complexity more and to avoid binaries completely, while “southern” partners underlined the “moral obligation to revert the binaries” – which means in fact maintaining them (Andreotti et.al. 2008:31). In this tension field, the authors chose to “expose learners to binaries in order to teach deconstruction”. This might work in some cases, in others it can also lead to a reinforcement of binaries. For example, in the “learning journal” related to activity 1.4 (which is about considerations from people “from other cultures” on development), a participant from the US (10/2/2011) feels that “in Western society” a “connection to the earth is lost”. A Finnish participant (3/30/2010) concludes his reflection on the exercise saying that “Westerners are also far away from spirituality”. On the other hand, another Finn (4/21/2011) writes: “I think it is enchanting how these examples confirmed my idea of innate solidarity and selflessness in the indigenous communities.” A Czech participant states that “For indigenous people it is important to keep good relationships with other people”. All these statements – and there are others – illustrate a simplistic view on two supposedly distinct groups of people with inherent, collective attributes – a view which is certainly far away from the complexity and heterogeneity of both “western” and “indigenous” groups. Of course there are also many more nuanced statements, and we don’t know if the quoted participants came later to a deconstruction of the highly moral binary between “western” and “indigenous” notions of development, but it is striking to observe this very strong dichotomy as a direct result of a TOE exercise. As a participant from Ireland (4/9/2011) put it: “Reading all of these perspectives highlights the divide between developed perspectives and developing perspectives and reiterates the fact that a unified take on development is not possible.” This stone solid dichotomy doesn’t leave any space for dialogue and a collective negotiation of a common cause for human kind.

In addition to the question of complexity, the way how **multiple perspectives**, are tabled is an element of quality in development education. TOE takes this aspect very seriously – in fact, illustrating and encouraging a critical reflection on various

perspectives on the various topics of the resource is at the very heart of TOE: “Participants are asked to engage in depth with [...] different views and explore the implications and limitations of [all] perspectives” (TOE FAQ). Each topic features various “mainstream perspectives” from different thinking schools such as liberal, Marxist, humanist etc. in order to illustrate heterogeneity of “western” thinking, as well as several quotes from “indigenous” people, which also outlines various viewpoints within this group. The case studies are set up of quotations from different actors involved in the case and show multiple perspectives on the topic. Concerning the possible reinforcement of binaries, the “different logics” section seems most problematic: It presents a two-column table which opposes “a ‘business’ (neoliberal) view of one end of the spectrum [...] in contrast with a construction of a ‘different logic’ based on the interviews we carried out with indigenous participants.” (TOE FAQ). This deliberate choice of extremes, also critically reflected in the FAQ section of the website, however contains a strong moral element, which implicitly labels one view as “better” than the other one. For example, the supposed “indigenous” perspective on education would aim at “learning to stand [...] on one’s own”, while the “western” view would be “educating people as cultivating bonsai for sale”. The ethics of an “indigenous” notion of development would be “co-existence, interdependences”, while the “western” ethics would be “competition, profit”. The binary of these opposed perspectives, clearly linked to a moral weighting, covers controversies and fault lines within the different viewpoints and might lead to stereotypes and simplifications. This can also be observed within the case study on the fate of Botswana Bushmen (unit 1.5): While these have been chased from their land due to economic reasons (diamond mining) from 1997, the topic is discussed as a primarily cultural issue: Shall they be able to continue their hunting life style, or not? Even from the presented bushman perspective, the choice is to stay and hunt or to choose “the city with a good education”. The idea that hunting and “development” (including “good education”, electricity, maybe even self-determined diamond mining) could go together is covered under the binary of forced development vs. maintenance of a traditional lifestyle and the victimization on the Bushmen.

How does TOE encourage **thinking in alternatives** regarding global development? As we have seen, the whole point of the resource is about deconstructing certainties

and opening access to alternative viewpoints on development. In particular the quotes from “indigenous” resource persons contribute to stimulate reflection on different angles on the discussed topics (for example when Mareana Taki from New Zealand outlines her highly ethical definition of development as “the quality and integrity of our relationships” in unit 1.4). The thinking about these different viewpoints and possible alternatives is encouraged, and the creative elaboration and further development of one’s own vision is a central element of the learning process through the individual contributions to the “learning journal”, and the possible review of other learner’s contributions. However, a deeper, more concrete and accessible exploration of alternatives to the current dominant development model, e.g. links to resources on “indigenous” development models and how they might be applicable in the political and economic situation of today’s world, is not proposed<sup>8</sup>. This might lead to a feeling of “discomfort and conflict” (TOE FAQ) regarding a harmful “western” development model (in particular, but not only regarding colonial history) and a supposedly harmonious “indigenous” development model, without showing up concrete ways of reconciliation and positive joint action towards a better, alternative development of the world.

#### **4. Methodical quality:**

The third aspect of quality to be discussed in this paper is related to methodological and didactic choices. Based on the analytic framework of this paper and the issue of binaries in TOE, I will reflect on questions of target group orientation, diversity of methods and participation.

In which way does the TOE methodology **consider its target group**, for example regarding interests, knowledge, values, needs and expectations of participants, and how do related didactic choices influence how participants consider binaries? As outlined in the first part of this paper, considerations around this question are confronted with the unclear and open character of TOE’s target group: Ideally (though not prominently indicated), participants are British “teachers or student teachers with limited knowledge about development or colonialism” (Andreotti et.al.

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<sup>8</sup> The uncommented and academic TOE bibliography is not an accessible resource to explore further alternative development models.

2008:33). The proposed four step didactic process – learning to unlearn, learning to listen, learning to learn and learning to reach out – is adapted to such an ideal-type of learner. However, the very character of an open online resource results in a much broader spectrum of participants' profiles, with varying knowledge base, interests and expectations. The resource does not provide adaptable learning paths, for example the possibility to access further information on a particular aspect. Participants who have already a more differentiated view on development might consider the dichotomy of “different logics” as simplistic, which might not facilitate the “unlearning”, i.e. questioning and deconstruction of own assumptions. Consequently, we can observe several comments like “I feel that the course has not taught me so much new things but made me apply the knowledge I've had before.” (Unit 1.6, Finnish participant 4/15/2011). Also, the course does not offer any interaction or tutoring when it comes to dealing with irritation, questions, conflict or frustration. While there is an “explicit intent to cause discomfort, conflict” (TOE FAQ) and thus strong, potentially emotional reactions, the learner is pretty much alone to handle these feelings. Regarding the question of binaries, the learning journal answers show many rather differentiated views on development, certainly also thanks to the TOE learning process, but we can assume that both the “one size fits all” learn path and the lack of accompanying measures can lead to the reinforcement of simplified worldviews with some learners, such as the one from Ireland (Unit 1.6, 4/26/2011) who states that “Indigenous knowledge is the basis of all knowledge.”

Concerning the **diversity of methods** proposed in TOE, there is a strong focus on individual participation, namely through two elements: “reflection” based on written documents provided in the resource, and individual written contributions to the “learning journal”. TOE also proposes videos as further resources, but their place in the learning process remains unclear and some don't seem to work for technical reasons. This choice favors one particular type of learning and neglects the holistic aspect of global learning didactics, based on a methodology which is “experiential, interactive, learner-centered, democratic, convivial, participatory and change-oriented.” (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Bourn, 2008:9) Social learning, in which the individual confronts her- or himself with reflections and opinions of peers, is proposed through the accessibility of other learners' journal texts. However, no interaction or discussion with peers is possible. The

methodological possibilities are naturally limited by the choice of an online only resource. However, one could have imagined a more varied approach, in particular addressing different senses and forms of expression, as well as interaction among participants and between students and a tutor, in order to stimulate the unlearning, listening and re-learning process, and to possibly avoid the reconstruction of binaries as documented above.

Individual **participation** is certainly a key element of the TOE resource, as the whole process is based on constant reflections and contributions by the participants. As claimed in the sense of a critical literacy, no ready-made answers are presented, and if so, learners are requested to critically question them. Participants can choose their own pace and extent of engagement, which is reflected e.g. in the quite diverse length of learning journal contributions. However, as mentioned, cooperative and interactive forms of learning are missing, and there is no possibility for learners to question, discuss, influence or shape the pedagogic framework as such. Also, there is no possibility to structurally link possible follow-up activities, e.g. emerging initiatives or research projects, to the TOE resource. A proposed social media page<sup>9</sup> and online discussion group<sup>10</sup>, which could be used for this purpose, are not active or not functional. Besides being regrettable that the potential of such follow-up is not used, the loneliness of the learner, possibly lost in unlearning, might contribute to an un-reflected reconstruction of moral binaries between “indigenous” and “western” knowledge and worldviews.

## 5. Conclusion

While TOE has a strong potential to open people’s minds to various and possibly new viewpoints on development issues, it can reinforce binaries between what might be considered as “us” (“westerners”) and “them” (“indigenous”) among some participants, as can be observed in certain learning journal entries. This seems to be the case mainly due to three shortcomings:

- **Handling of complexity and different perspectives:** The inherent contradiction between the intended deconstruction of binaries and the choice

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=40681145495&ref=mf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/toeinitiative?pli=1>

to build TOE around the dichotomy between “western” and “indigenous” perspectives seems to be the main fault line regarding the possible reinforcement of binaries. Also, due to the conceptual roots in post-colonial theory, the underlying worldview has a strongly historical connotation, without opening the space for a possible reconciliation and joint social action of “western” and “indigenous” actors.

- **Target group orientation:** While a broad range of participants beyond the initially intended target group uses the resource, no adaptability and/or accompanying measures are proposed. This “one-size-fits-all” format can lead to very variable results in the learning process.
- **Participation and interaction:** The strong focus on the individual learning process neglects the social element of learning, for example through group discussions, joint tasks or other interaction between learners and with tutors and/or resource persons. Potential for collective thinking and possible joint action is not entirely used.

It would be necessary to confirm or reject the outlined analysis through a more substantial evaluation, including data on TOE participants and possibly questionnaires or interviews with participants. However, beyond the actual case of the discussed resource, Andreotti’s et.al. (2008) conception of development education, based on historical “western” colonisation and the individual learning process (including being “prepared to be accused of historical harm” – TOE FAQ) tends to reinforce a worldview of a separated and divided humanity, which leaves little space and hope for collective change and action. Alternative conceptions such as Giri and van Ufford’s (2004:21) view on development as “a shared human responsibility” and Kumar’s (2008) case for development education as collective and dialogical action for democracy might propose a more positive and constructive vision for overcoming binaries and towards global justice.

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