

NARRATIVE REPORT OF

The Danish-Arab Dialogue Seminar entitled

”I See Myself Through You – Filming the Process of Cross-cultural Understanding and Communication”
May 1-4, 2006

Background

With the aim to overcome some of the stereotypes and anxieties that exist between the Arab world and Denmark, and were highlighted by the publication of the cartoons considered offensive to Islam and Muslims and therefore caused tensions worldwide, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCC) facilitated a 4 day dialogue seminar from the 1st-4th of May 2006 at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut. With a twofold objective, the project aimed on the one hand to teach 30 youth leaders from Denmark and the Arab World in the process of dialogue through a focused period of training and exchange. On the other hand, in order to reach a broader audience than the participating youth, a Lebanese film crew, Mad4Films, filmed the seminar with the purpose of making a documentary film to be used as an educational tool as well as being screened in broadcast media and at documentary film festivals, such as the Images of the Middle East in Denmark.

Demonstration and Explanation

The first day of the seminar was dedicated to each group, the Danish and the Middle Eastern, preparing and presenting their point of view on the cartoon controversy. The starting point of the preparation was questions posed by FDCC to be answered by each group: *What is our perspective on this controversy? What happened and why? What do we want the other group to understand about our/my perspective? What do we want to say to them? Are there things we think they don't understand that they should? Where do we feel there may be points of contention? What will be uncomfortable to talk about? What are you angry about? And what do you think the other group might be angry about or uncomfortable with? Where are the opportunities to come together? What do you think you will agree on?* During the day the two groups worked intensively on preparing their presentation and they ended up with two quiet different but equally expressive presentations.



The Middle Eastern group chose to do their presentation as a demonstration with signs expressing different opinions and questions such as “Misunderstanding”, “Is Violence a Solution?” and “Freedom of Speech?” By one of them acting as a journalist asking the demonstrators questions, they came about different subject such as how important religion is to people in the Middle East and how it in many ways functions as an identity marker. Moreover, they explained how people in the Middle East don't have sufficient



access to express their ideas and opinions, which is why violence to a large extent becomes the only way to express one selves - meaning that the demonstration wasn't only a reaction against the cartoons but an expression of frustrations in general. Lastly, they came about the Christian Arabs who in many ways were caught in the middle during the conflict, being on the one hand as much offended by the stereotyped cartoons, but on the other hand in some situations associated with the cartoons as a Christian attack on Muslims.

The Danish group did their presentation the explanatory way including all the participants representing different perspectives on the controversy. In this way they explained the background of the publication of the cartoons, the different points of views in Denmark, their fears and difficulties in understanding the aggressiveness of the reactions in the Middle East, why the prime minister couldn't apologize but that the Newspaper could and should have, and lastly, how the Danish Muslims - as the Arab Christians - were caught in the middle being hurt twice, first by the publication of the cartoons and then by the burning of the Danish flag and the embassies.

Lectures and exercises

During the seminar Agnete Holm (Danmission) and Hadi Ghantous (FDCD) facilitated different types of lectures and exercises with the purpose of training the participating youth in the process of dialogue by providing them both with some ground rules for dialogue through lectures and with practical experiences in dialogue through exercises.

Storytelling

The beginning exercise on May 2nd was a storytelling exercise. Here the participants were divided into groups of 4-5 where each were to tell a dialogue story – either one that went bad or a fruitful one. This exercise had a twofold objective, firstly to make the participants reflect upon questions like *what is dialogue?*, *when is dialogue fruitful?*, and *when has a dialogue been a failure?*, and secondly to raise their consciousness of what it means to be actively listening and not interrupting a person telling a story. In order to do this some ground rules were given. Each participant had 4-5 minutes to tell their story, no more, no less. If they didn't manage to tell their story within the given time it was just too bad, and if they finished before the time was up, the rest of the time should be shared in silence. This way the exercise put focus on the fact that some people always talk too much while others never say much.

During the exercises the group in general discovered how their dialogue stories were more or less similar even though the content of their stories were different. In this way they saw in the person from another culture a person with whom they could share their experiences, and how the experiences that we live are shaping our lives. Moreover, they experienced the difficulty in sitting in silence, not interrupting, and actually being actively listening instead of being obsessed with themselves and their own story.

The different Levels of Dialogue

During the second day of the seminar Agnete Holm facilitated different lectures on dialogue in order to provide the participants with some ground rules to be used when practicing dialogue. The lectures were given not in order to tell people how to do dialogue but to make them aware of some important aspects of dialogue.

Among other things they were told to try to listen more than they speak and not use the time while others are speaking to think about what to say themselves. This was done to make them aware of the fact that listening requires to get involved in what the other person is saying. Moreover, they were encouraged to avoid comparing the best in their own culture, religion etc. with the worst in the

other, primarily because this kind of comparison tends to push people into the defensive. In addition to these ground rules time was spent on reflecting upon the different levels of dialogue. Misunderstandings are likely to happen if the persons engaging in dialogue are not speaking on the same level. Both dialogues such as intellectual, social/ethical and personal/spiritual dialogues can be fruitful as long as all parties involved in the dialogue is aware of whether the dialogue is the one or the other.



Restoration

The first exercise practicing dialogue after the lectures ended up being a decisive turning point during the seminar. Here the participants faced the first difficulties doing dialogue, not only talking about dialogue. Put into small groups in order to practice what they learned and experienced during the last two days, restoration was chosen as a subject because it was related to the cartoon controversy, but an emphasis was put upon the discussion not stopping there. The groups were given the option to talk about restoration either within a political, social or personal context, but they all ended up discussing the concept on a political level. This resulted in many different and interesting discussions but with a primary focus on the Middle East. As a result some of the Danish participants expressed afterwards that they felt drained being only listening and not really participating in the dialogue. By one of the Danish participants putting this out in the open, the evaluation ended up being an honest, heart to heart evaluation, where people really opened themselves and shared and told each other what they felt and what they found out about themselves and the others.

Religion and Politics

At the last session the group was given the opportunity to choose to enter a small group talking about either politics or religion as a reaction to the experiences from the session about

restoration. This was done in order to give the participants the opportunity to talk about a subject that they had a special interest in, instead of the facilitators deciding the subject. Two big themes were chosen as umbrellas where people could discuss many different issues related to essential aspects in life. In this way they could practice dialogue on things that were important to them and experience how this would go on. Using the experiences from the last exercise, this exercise showed to be an all in all good experience the participants being conscious about their own tendencies either to talk too much or to keep silence. As a result the groups in general experienced a more balanced dialogue during this session.

Documenting the seminar

With its constant presence the film crew, and its duty to actualise the second part of the project; the documentary, Mad4Films, became a central part of the dialogue seminar. Fortunately, the film crew was professional and did its job in a very un-noticeable and un-interrupting way. At the same time, the group in general quickly got used to the camera as an ever present part of the seminar. In this way instead of affecting the seminar the film crew became an integrated part of it. Beside from filming the workshops the film crew also followed 6 participants (3 from Denmark and 3 from the Middle East) during the whole seminar in order to have a focus on a few people and their experience during and evaluation of the seminar. The purpose was to have them tell about their experiences of the dialogue that was going on in the workshops and the input that it had on them.



Those 6 people will form a very essential part of the waited –for documentary.

The Dialogue Center in Sidon

On May 3 and 4 the group went on two trips besides the exercises practicing dialogue. May 3 they went to Harissa and Byblos with the sole purpose of them enjoying free time together, as having fun together is an important way to get to know each other and experiencing dialogue in free conversations. On May 4 the group went to visit the Centre of Development and Dialogue in Sidon in order to have an opportunity to gain insight in other dialogue programmes than the project they themselves were a part of and to have another chance for having fun together while seeing more places in Lebanon.

During the evenings only two dinners in two different touristic areas in Beirut were planned as a part of the programme, whereas the rest of the nights were free for the participants to plan on their own. This was again done in order to give them some free time to get to know each other outside the seminar.

The Outcome of the Seminar

The participants being open and more than engaged in getting to know each other, the seminar by all means lived up to FDCD's expectations. Overall the participants were very positive about the experience and the impact of the workshop was therefore more than clear. A lot of the participants expressed that the lectures and exercises during the seminar provided them with new ideas of how to continue emphasising the importance of promoting and engaging in dialogue.