Multicultural studies from a Sámi perspective: Bridging traditions and challenges in an indigenous setting

Asta Mitkijá Balto and Liv Østmo
Sámi University College, Norway

The Sámi University College has from the beginning of its establishment in 1994 provided advanced post-graduate study for students in multicultural understanding. This article deals with our experiences in providing such education for some ten years. It is difficult for our students, and people in general, to change their normative views of other people. Students examine how such ties can result in either inclusive or exclusive interactions, and the article discusses how difficult it is to broaden one's views and reflect on one's own and other people's ties and attitudes critically.

In teaching, we encourage our students to use their stories as a means of analysing their experiences. Storytelling is an important part of the Sámi heritage and other indigenous heritages. Therefore, it is a fascinating resource for learning. In this article, we examine how effective this tool is and how it enables learning by creating a Sámi learning environment, or *searvelatnja* 'a shared room'. We also look at how storytelling can contribute to self-esteem, analytical cultural understanding and reflective skills. We highlight the enhancement of cultural sensitivity and analytic thought as central elements in the continuation of building and upholding democratic societies.

Introduction

We often hear people arguing that we Sámi are already multicultural, that multiculturalism is not an issue we think about, as multicultural encounters are part and parcel of our everyday lives. To some extent, being part of the Sámi community renders this true, as the cultural background enables one to manage in the environment into which one has been born. However, Sámi society also needs to enhance its capacity to examine and understand culture from a more reflective perspective in order to note prejudices, stereotypes, variations, changes, similarities and differences. Sápmi is a term for the area where Sámi people live and also signifies their imagined community. Sámi are an indigenous people who reside within the present day borders of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. In Sápmi, in the broader sense, authorities and people need to be enabled to treat people justly and impartially.

From an indigenous perspective we base our relations to the state in which we live, on the principle that all the groups and nations that share a territory can, together and in peace, socialise and create conditions for equal opportunities and respectful communication. This principle is recognised by Norway as a part of this nation's democratic process and a way of relating to the Sámi people. While many countries in the world have these values in common, we still find that conflict, racism, discrimination and favouritism in the Nordic countries persist. Multicultural studies are needed in order to create a better communication and understanding between peoples. Towards this end, a postgraduate course entitled 'Advanced Multicultural Studies'

(AMS) was launched by the Sámi University College in 1994 for teachers, journalists, health personnel, police and other officials. In this article, we examine some experiences from our AMS training, which ran from 1994 to 2002. AMS was arranged as a part-time course over a year, divided into two parts, MCS 1 and MCS 2. When carrying out the training, we noticed how our students struggled to free themselves from judgmental attitudes. This normative way of thinking is common and is a result of the fact that every human being is tied to their culture; therefore, each new group of students had to learn to recognise how such ties can limit one's perspective. During this training we challenged them to act or at least to perceive situations more impartially and with less bias. It is not easy to rid oneself of narrow outlooks and become accustomed to examining our ties and biases more critically.

Finding the path

Our aim is to trace the path that we followed with our students, to look for some aspects of the traditional Sámi ways of organising teaching and the understandings brought forth of how we learn. Since this is within a frame of multicultural understanding we also discuss the challenges of analytical thinking and cultural sensitivity.

First, however, we start by outlining the principles of the course and how these principles were put into practice. We examine how the use of students' experiences and stories contributed to the learning process. As part of this reflection process, we look at the teaching and learning methods that were applied and discuss their traditional basis in Sámi culture.

Most of our attention here is taken up with our subsequent written reflections on the course, thereby resembling a retrospective of comments. Within the framework of pedagogy, this can be called – as Laursen does – reflective didactic work. According to him the position of didactics has changed; from giving most of the attention to the planning phase of teaching to rather opening up more for the post-training assessment process. An evaluation of the training contributes to continuously improving the teaching (Laursen, 1997). That is also what we intend, that is, to improve the teaching and develop new understandings of the didactics used in an indigenous context.

In principal AMS gave more space to students' experiences and interests than is common in theoretical studies. This also applied to stories as a working method. Therefore, we examine whether these principles and the ways these were carried out has influenced the pace of students' understanding of self, analytical cultural understanding and greater skills of reflection. As Sámi are an indigenous people in a vulnerable situation whose culture is threatened, we analyse how this kind of training can promote the empowerment of the Sámi and other indigenous peoples. We also look at how enhanced theoretical knowledge promotes cultural sensitivity and how this appears in the learning process. Our discussion is based on the students' assignments, stories and evaluations, in addition to our own notes.

Some principles and working methods

The aim of AMS was emphasise the understanding of the concept 'culture' and to enhance intercultural communication. Another goal was to introduce the tools of cultural analysis and to become conscious of how identity and culture are interconnected. According to the admission requirements the students needed qualifications from an institution of higher education and at least two years of working practise. The goal of this requirement was to make AMS professionally relevant as without such experience, the method could not be used successfully. The course was one of the few studies at the Sámi University College that was given in Norwegian so as to attract not only those Sámi who has lost their language but also all students who spoke Norwegian, whether Sámi or not. This created an intercultural setting in the class-room. To strengthen the Sámi language on a high level, most of the Sámi University College's courses are offered in Sámi. The purpose of the assignments in our course was to teach the reflective method, to become accustomed to discussing context and to analyse how phenomena are connected or can be compared with each other. Continual evaluations strengthened training in reflective thinking and the students' personal enhancement.

Experiences were given more space

It is interesting now after many years to reflect on how we gave the space for stories and storytelling as part of our working method. The students were encouraged to present their experiences through stories and their stories often served as a catalyst for their comprehensive project work. At the time, we were not fully conscious of the importance of the role of storytelling, but still we used it and found the method very convenient.

Our positive experiences of using this method for both students and instructors, led us to look at story-telling in a wider indigenous context. Nergård highlights the production of Sámi knowledge and in that respect he considers story-telling as the fundament for the transfer of Sámi knowledge to new generations. They are an archive for experiences and a source for understanding and perception. In this way, stories reflect the Sámi way of thinking (Nergård, 2006, 78–79). According to Balto, story-telling has a key role in the traditional ways of teaching and learning in Sámi societies (1997, 58–59). Kuokkanen discusses the significance of story-telling and how this transfer of knowledge represents a method for traditional teaching, which benefits from the fact that knowledge is woven into the language, and expressed through the oral tradition (Kuokkanen, 2000). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Marie Battiste (2000) add an additional dimension to narrations, suggesting that they are an important tool in the decolonisation of indigenous peoples. Narration opens doors into the sharing, reminiscing and interpreting of events that colonisation has forced on people and nations.

The AMS approach

The enhancement of cultural sensitivity and analytical thinking played a central role in AMS. Therefore, we will examine here these themes through some of the theories that

were applied throughout the course. We will draw attention to theories on cultural sensitivity, the theories that our students had to be familiar with in their study.

Cultural knowledge and understanding

Kvernmo and Stordahl (1990) and Stordahl (1998) have developed a conceptual framework for cultural understanding, their attempt to bring a Sámi perspective to the field of multicultural studies.

Stordahl and Kvernmo discriminate between cultural background, cultural knowledge and cultural understanding. Their aim is to raise awareness about the challenges we (Sámi researchers) face when we are members and participants in our local communities yet from a professional perspective need also to take the position of observer. To change position from the participant's view to that of observer is not easy and requires specific study and training. In Sámi societies it is common to claim that since we Sámi are born into a multicultural society, we already have special skills enabling us to master the challenges this brings forth, therefore we are not in need of any particular schooling toward that end. This is taken into consideration by the authors as they discuss the fact that our cultural background does not automatically provide us with cultural sensitivity towards others, be it a background in a multicultural or a monocultural setting. Stordahl and Kvernmo question this assertion and call for theoretical studies and training for building up cultural sensitivity among professionals. According to them, we are all born into a cultural context. This contextual background colours and affects us and gives a kind of cultural cover, or wrapping, which envelopes us. However, most people are not aware of this and do not stop to consider how their thinking is coloured and affected by their background. Furthermore, there are differences between people when it comes to their overall awareness, - some are trained to see how dependent we are on our own cultural backgrounds and others are not. Individuals belonging to the majority are seldom aware of these issues and often take their background as granted: their culture is that which is normal. So, according to Stordahl and Kvernmo, *cultural background* "is the base for knowledge, action and norms and values that a person acquires through growing up in a certain culture. Primarily it only provides the person with the competence that makes them part of a moral and cultural community" (1990: 5). As backgrounds vary so also does the base for knowledge that is provided. Despite the advantages of the cultural background, everyone has to continue to increase their knowledge and skills.

To make clear the difference between the knowledge you acquire by being born into a society as your cultural background and the knowledge you acquire through studies, Kvernmo and Stordahl add the concept of *cultural knowledge* and of *cultural understanding*.

According to them, cultural knowledge is the more encyclopaedic knowledge of different fields of culture as history, living conditions, economy, upbringing, social relationships, and relations between generations, gender roles, religion, politics and minority policies. Cultural knowledge is in the means of knowledge relevant to understanding the specific conditions of a particular society. The specific conditions

for the Sámi are, as mentioned difficulties and contradictions that indigenous peoples and minority nations or stigmatised groups face (Kvernmo and Stordahl 1990, p.8).

To be in a minority position often means that you are forced to see the world through the eyes of the majority, to know their language and be familiar with their culture and way of thinking. This way, the representatives of a minority learn to shift between perspectives and acquaint themselves with the culture of the majority. When you encounter a foreign culture or a culture you are not familiar with, you can through various studies or research, acquire cultural knowledge. Additional dimensions of the concept of culture are varieties and changes within a culture. A static understanding of the concept leads to objectification or essentialising of culture (Kvernmo and Stordahl 1990, p.8).

In an indigenous context, there is a tension between being culturally authentic and 'pure' and being a member of a modern changing, diverse and contemporary world. (Smith, 1999, p.72-73.) On the one hand indigenous people use the concept strategically to highlight the particularities of their cultures and situations, in order to assist their claims for specific rights and requirements. On the other hand, according to Smith, the term 'authentic' is used by nation states as one of the criteria to determine "who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, and who is still primitive, innocent and free from western contaminations". In doing so, they do not allow that indigenous cultures can evolve, nor recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. It seems that indigenous cultures cannot be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. (Smith, 1999, p.74) In this way, nation states attempt to maintain their position of patronage with regards to indigenous peoples.

According to Stordahl and Kvernmo's conceptual framework, the concept of cultural understanding requires an analytical approach. It represents a tool to analyse the variety in how people organise their social lives and how these varieties manifest themselves. Here, we could also use the term to 'contextualise' which means locating actions and events in situations, in human roles, into the times and places into which they belong. Cultural understanding also entails grasping how we ourselves participate in social systems and, thus, carry on the social conventions within which we grew up and in which we live. Stordahl and Kvernmo summarise cultural understanding as follows: "cultural understanding is theoretical insight which gives competence to work analytically with interpersonal relations and problems both in multicultural and mono cultural environments" (1990, p.5). To be conscious of your position as observer means strengthening your cultural sensitivity and a part of this is to be reflective and compare your own and other people's cultural knowledge. In practical situation we are all both participants and co-actors in actions and we need to take a meta position as observers and reflect on our own as well as others cultural values and categories. When reflecting, you mobilise all your competences; knowledge, values, judging, attitudes, emotions, rationalities etc. An attitude of reflection can obviate stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination. The acquired reflective competence should enable to avoid acting on basis merely on preferences or on intuitive feelings. Kalleberg discusses research ethics and in that respect he calls for humility to be a part of the scientific / ethics discourse. This means recognising our own constraints of knowledge when it comes to

the plurality of the world and other people's knowledge and insights (Kalleberg, 2002, p.152). We are talking about being humble and respectful to others, to be able see our own rationality and failures and realise that we are dependent on each other as reflecting beings.

Cultural encounters and power

Cultural encounters are settings where people with different experiences and cultural backgrounds come together. The concept of multiculturalism and multicultural encounters often hide the possibly asymmetric relations between members of groups. It is common to consider these encounters as being meetings of equals, and ignore the power aspects that exist between people(s). The knowledge of how the power influences relations when dealing with majority-minority relations and relations between majority and indigenous peoples is important when fostering competence in multicultural understanding.

Power appears on many levels and is manifested at the micro, medium and macro levels of society. The micro level is represented by the meetings of individuals, the medium level, the meetings of groups, and the macro level is concerned with the relations between the state and peoples (Barth, 1994). The decisions, interests and points of view of majority groups are taken as universal when dealing with others, especially minorities. The 'rulers' decide what is considered to be normal and valid. Despite this, and all evidence to the contrary, they do not consider themselves to be in a position of power.

However, the position of indigenous and minority peoples' in society can generally be characterised by powerlessness. As a result they adapt their lives to be without power and at the same time articulate the need for an equal relationship in order that the minority group is empowered.

The manifestations of power do not need to be expressed explicitly, but takes subtle forms, as also attested to by the AMS students. Their stories reveal experiences of discrimination on a more personal level, in the forms of disdain and derision. Marianne Gullestad uses the term 'hegemony' to label the power of the rulers in these encounters and she exemplifies this in a Norwegian context. She states that for Norwegians, it is difficult for them to grasp that they are in a hegemonic position and that this is an institutionalised structure. (Gullestad, 2002, p.16).

The next section attempts to demonstrate by way of example how cultural knowledge, understanding and background, as well as power relations, are concretised in the stories and experiences of students. We also examine how student assignments enhanced cultural sensitivity.

Small stories: A potential for growth

Analysing the stories

Students' stories and experiences are used to examine issues relating to cultural encounters. In their comprehensive project work, they chose certain issues or events to

work with. When presenting a story, we usually mix descriptions of the occurrence with our personal interpretations and opinions about the event in question. The first step is to train oneself to be conscious about the normative ideas and attitudes that are woven into the story. The aim is to discriminate between descriptive presentations of situations and the personal interpretation of these. While working on this principle the students discover the need for more nuanced knowledge and information to fully understand the problem or the issue. The second step is to add comments, explanations and questions to the description of the event.

In a way, the assignments took the form of 'research training', in which the students' descriptions of various situations were not relying only on their thoughts and beliefs. Students could check the validity of their descriptions. By interpreting the situation, by analysing and reflecting on the event and by connecting the event with theories and explanatory models, new ways of conceptualising the event can open up.

During their practice, students shifted between two positions: that of a participant and that of a community observer. The observer's position is like that of a researcher; trying to stand outside or maintaining a distance. This was a position which students found challenging, but at the same time entailed new insights. To reflect on the position of the participant can also strengthen the variety of interpretations.

Student contexts

The AMS students represented a range of Sámi communities, from both Sámi and Sámi-Norwegian environments in which the Sámi population was either in a majority or a minority situation. Their backgrounds and personal experiences reflected present day Sámi conditions and in which students introduced current knowledge about their societies, much of which knowledge was the kind that is not written down. This knowledge also served as part of the curriculum.

Our intention here is not to fully contextualise Sámi society, but more to give attention to some characteristics of this society that we found relevant for the students background and their stories. The stories reflected a variety of backgrounds, sources of knowledge, the ethno-political situation and the ongoing negotiations about Sámi identity.

The Sámi belong to a culture which has been relegated to the position of a minority and been oppressed; an attempt has even been made to wipe out the whole culture, according to Stordahl. The ethno history of the Sámi abounds in cases of personal defeat. Stordahl also refers to negotiations on how to be a Sámi and at the same time be a participant in a modern society. These discourses are apparent in everyday discussions on small issues, such as clothing styles and modes of living as well as in the discourses on the founding of Sámi representative bodies. Furthermore Stordahl ties these negotiations to social structures, explaining how they contribute to the promotion of Sámi ethno politics both nationally and internationally (Stordahl, 1996, p.158).

Cultural sensitivity is enhanced

Cultural encounters can be examined from several perspectives and, here, we focus on two different ways of doing that: either by assessing the characteristics of a culture or by discussing and analysing them. The students' stories revealed what we already know about cultural understanding in general, that it is strictly normative and tied to our present knowledge, action and value system. This normative basis teaches us that knowledge is not 'pure' knowledge: it is connected to rules that influence our deeds and actions. It is expected that all Sámi, when wearing their *gákti* (traditional outfit) should know the difference between what is a man's and what is a woman's woven ribbon for their traditional shoes. If a woman wears a man's ribbon she is socially sanctioned. In the follow-up discussions, our purpose was to raise awareness of how we are part of a moral and cultural community and thus judge actions from that point of view. From another perspective, training to be observers, we were able to recognise this as a normative phenomenon. When our students became aware of how the 'secret' rules of knowledge could exclude people, they realised the importance of knowing the meanings and the influence of words, theories and explanations.

On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with being normative. Students contribute to the building of Sámi society and want to know and comprehend cultural values and also assess their benefits to future generations (Halvorsen, 2004, p.20). However, in the development of institutions and society, we need to recognise and take care of all members of society, as every human being is of equal value. Together the students dealt with their ties of belonging and range of backgrounds, and this enhanced their skill in recognising both others' and their own bias and impartiality. To use Kvernmo and Stordahl's words, the students learned to know *the dark spots* that prevent us from seeing social differences and variations (1990, p.6).

The negotiations about how to be a 'real' Sámi: to speak the language, to wear the *gákti*, to belong to a reindeer herding family, were often an issue in the students' stories. But also the opposite position was discussed, that those Sámi who have lost the language, or do not wear *gákti* feel that they are not accepted as 'real'. This discourse is internal between Sámi groups and is one that often appears in the public realm. In a study situation, this gives an excellent opportunity to develop our skills in analytical approaches. Referring to Smith, this shows the tension between being culturally authentic and 'pure' and being a member of a diverse and contemporary world. In addition, there is a need for the knowledge about how this situation, loss of language, *gákti* and culture occurred. To understand the discourse, the history of colonisation, has to be addressed. According to Daes, we are here talking about colonialism, not in the sense of occupying land, or military occupations, but colonialism in the sense of the subjective, social, and spiritual levels of the mind (Daes 2000). For the Sámi in Norway, their history is characterised by a process that has been referred to as 'Norwegianisation', which included ethnic discrimination and cultural destruction. By reflecting on that, the students can compare their own experiences with others' and acknowledge a variety of experiences on the interpersonal level. Despite Norwegianisation, there is also a history that speaks to the strength of Sámi culture, which has ensured its survival. It is common to explain this success and failure as

being the result of certain qualifications and moral qualities, as Wadel explains (Wadel 1990, p.43). Here in our context we note this same explanation, as regarding those people who have succeeded or failed in upholding their cultural heritage. However, in this study, we investigate the conditions for successes as well as for failures; in order to, among other things, sort out the actors, forms of interaction, premises for interaction, power and dependency relations, and time and space.

As already mentioned, cultural knowledge varies between the members in a society, and this is also true for Sámi students. Their stories need to be nuanced and interpreted with knowledge from different angles. Some students stressed the dilemmas of keeping the traditions strictly, for instance in Sámi craft, *duodji*, versus the need for its renewal. Discussing the *gákti*, they questioned to what extent it is possible to change the colours and patterns and whether to mix women's and men's outfits or to mix outfits from different areas. When students evaluated the use of the Sámi dress, they did much more than just look at the designs, colours and histories connected with the traditional clothing. The students recognised a contradiction: if the dress is maintained as being 'unchangeable', a consequence might be that the use of *gákti* will decrease and so also will Sámi handicrafts and traditions. To accept changes, also means that we are obliged to question how radical the change might be without losing the basis of its tradition. Students also reflected on what we actually 'carry' when we wear a Sámi dress: Are we showing our identity or are we just dressing up? The answers 'carry' the meanings, the significances behind the actions and the cultural expressions. Dahl emphasises that there are unspoken codes connected with symbols; he also states that one can notice from the form of cultural expressions that they have an external form but also a meaning which carries the form (2001, p.58–59). If symbols do not mean anything for a person, like the symbol of *gákti*, if there are no feelings connected to them or if a person is unable to interpret their meaning, they will be nothing more than external symbols.

The students' stories showed that in order to perceive their dilemmas in a new perspective, they had to add sufficient knowledge about Sámi craft, its history, its preservation and renewal and the way it varies geographically. The meaning of symbols is also important to discuss, in order to realise in this context that there are differences within Sámi society. If the discussion is broadened to include the public discourse on Sámi handicrafts, about the intellectual property rights and the commercial exploitation among other things, it opens up for an optimal learning process.

Public debates reveal more than just facts about issues: they bring forth people's emotions, attitudes and values. Stories mediate morals and values as Nergård underlines, though he also comments that stories can be told just for amusement. According to him, stories first of all transfer traditions and connect these to the way of life and insights. Furthermore, he highlights two important elements of storytelling. On the one hand, they are predescriptive; this means that they contain ethical values as advice on how to manage life. On the other hand, he says, they are reconstructive which means that new stories spring forth from former ones. (Nergård, 2006, p.25-33). The students' stories also started as pre-descriptions and through the process of

discussions, analyses and the theoretical approaches, new stories are created. As stories in general in indigenous communities, are part of a community's collective memory, the reconstructed stories will contribute to the renewal of the collective mind.

Consciousness raising

Smith (2003) asserts the use of the concepts colonisation and decolonisation as focusing mainly on the coloniser. The historical oppression is a fact, but in order to move forward, he introduces the term 'consciousness raising' to accentuate a more pro-active approach to politics. Norwegianisation policies towards Sámi have for a long time been a systematic part of the power and political structures of the state of Norway as well as its official objectives. Exclusion, contempt and considering someone inferior because of racial or ethnic reasons and discrimination in general are complex processes and often interlaced with social structures and ways of thinking. Thinking in terms of race has its origin in cultural hierarchies and has become intertwined with people's attitudes and has, as a result, mutated into what could be called 'common sense'. For generations, mainstream society has excluded Sámi and treated them with contempt both as individuals and as a people. However, exclusive practices are not limited to the majority – minority relationship, but are found also among the Sámi and in Sámi communities. Høgmo's paper on 'the third alternative' discusses the situation faced by those Sámi who have been the victims of the Norwegianisation process, such as loss of language and identity. He introduces the concept of either being Sámi, non-Sámi or as the third alternative - having no identity. He highlights the dilemmas some Sámi face in managing their identity and the problems faced by those who do not want to reveal their Sáminess. In the Norwegian context they have to hide their Sáminess and, in the Sámi context, they are blamed if they deny their Sáminess. (Høgmo 1986.) The stories opened up discussions on the differences of identity management in various situations and experiences.

The students' stories on exclusion and contempt dealt with both the Sámi as a group and as individuals. In order to analyse social structures, the students needed to see the stories in a wider context. One story dealt with a son discovering that his father, whom he had never heard speaking Sámi, surprised him as speaker of the language. The father had hidden his Sáminess so as to be accepted as an employee at a mining company close to the border with the then Soviet Union. In the 1900s, the Norwegian state considered Sámi and Finns to be a threat to the nation's security policy in areas close to the border with the Soviet Union, due to the tense nature of international relations during the Cold War. This shows how history brings new explanations and insights into what has happened, and how it broadens views from the personal level to the level of international power relations. In this case, to be culturally sensitive, means understanding the conditions that this father was dependent on at that time.

Another story shows the crash between different lifestyles when a reindeer herding mother is consulting with a public health nurse. The public health nurse asserts that regular eating and sleeping routines must be set for the well-being of her baby. Such expectations cannot be fulfilled in a reindeer herding family's way of life. Their lives are dependent on cycles that do not run according to regular working hours, for

example, they have to take into consideration seasonal cycles and live according to the best conditions for the reindeer. As this nurse represented authority, the mother did not argue her case as to what was best in her view for her baby, so she withdrew from an area of potential conflict. When analysing this situation, the first reaction might be that this is a kind of contempt from the authority's side, but another possible way of seeing it, is that the nurse did not intentionally treat the mother with disdain. From a communicational point of view, the lack of knowledge between these two persons was obvious. The nurse was not familiar with the way of life of reindeer herding families. She was mainly accustomed to her official way of thinking and saw only her own view of what health meant, while the mother did not articulate her family's needs at all. The communication collapsed. The nurse did not intentionally treat the mother with contempt, but obviously cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity would have given her a better capacity to work professionally and provide equal service to the variety of members of society.

To further strengthen the capacity for sensitivity, Høgmo states (1998), that it is important to recognise when people are treated with disdain and considered as being inferior. Such attitudes are communicated through small movements, looks, ways of using the voice and the choice of words. It is common to deny disdain by blaming the persons that have been held in contempt and say that they were the ones who interpreted the situation incorrectly. Both the one who holds and the one who is held in contempt must have the skill to read and interpret the various codes. What hurt our students more than anything else was dealing with and looking at situations in which a Sámi held another Sámi in contempt, for example, by doubting the person's Sáminess or on the contrary, calling him or her a 'Super-Sámi', a negative labelling for one who has been in forefront of the Sámi movement.

There are numerous discussions and a variety of views and opinions on what it means to be Sámi, what the content of Sáminess is. In her doctoral thesis, Stordahl discusses the challenges of being a Sámi and at the same time being a member of a global society. She focuses on the broad range of ongoing negotiations that this entails; from the smallest details like what kind of outfit is acceptable or what kind of architecture represents the Sámi living style the most, to what kind of political institutions are appropriate for the Sámi. (Stordahl 1998, p.158.) This wide variety illustrates that there is no single explanation for belonging. According to Gullestad, identity depends always on negotiation. It is not set in stone, but is negotiated, argued about in social interactions and accepted or eventually questioned (2002, p.245). The ongoing debates in Sámi society about belonging or not belonging, about real Sáminess and to what extent you can make your Sáminess evident, illustrate what Sámi consider important when maintaining, developing and adapting Sámi society to modern times. Again we have to refer to Smith 2003 to shift to from seeing ourselves as victims to a shift towards a proactive mind and see ourselves as subjects.

The AMS program differed from other multicultural studies in Norway in that we recognised, explored and analysed issues from Sámi, indigenous and minority perspectives. This provided new approaches to multicultural discussions in general, by also challenging members of the majority to analyse their positions and train their

sensitivity to Sámi practices and views. The voice of the Sámi, minority and indigenous people is needed to reveal the hegemonic mentality of the majority in order to challenge the basis of multicultural studies elsewhere in Norway.

The story of learning

One of the students asked pointedly, 'Why didn't I learn this earlier – my life would have been quite different' indicating that the course on cultural understanding benefited both Sámi society and her personally. To share stories and to exchange experiences and lessons learned was according to many students, the most important part of the course. Now, years afterwards, we reflect on which aspects of the course made it succeed as they became significant for the students. Our approach is in line with what Laursen states that new didactics focuses on the reflection that takes place after the teaching is finished. Reflection raises critical questionings that provide new understanding and can contribute to change and renew the organisation of education, and this also applies to AMS (Laursen, 1997).

Searvelanjas: In the shared room

A key component of the AMS was the creation, together with our students of what we called a shared room, in which students could relate in safety their personal thoughts and therefore in their work and as human beings could develop professionally. The students took a common path to the shared room by intentionally applying to the AMS program, and they wanted to learn how to manage cultural meetings both in their working and personal lives. Through such a motivation, they committed themselves to contributing to the content of the shared room and making it into a fruitful and secure environment.

Searvelatnja therefore allowed for discussions on sensitive issues, like descriptions of how a lack of power often resulted in arguments, disagreements and even resignation. The internal discriminatory habits among Sámi are painful experiences, because they deal with our ability, or inability, to control our lives. Naturally, when training focuses on such issues, teachers have to provide confident communication strategies. The instructor has to take the lead by telling stories in order to show that the discussion of painful experiences is permitted; and this makes it easier for students to continue. In this way, the classroom becomes a learning arena in which the students feel confident enough to participate. Mikkel Nils Sara calls such an arena of learning, *searvelatnja*, 'the shared room'. He explains that traditional Sámi shared learning takes place when people across generations interact and while working together they share skills, knowledge and values. Each participant in *searvelatnja* has his or her own task (Sara, 2003: 125).

Searvelatnja gives participants the opportunity to articulate their cultural backgrounds, investigate their views in a safe setting and enables them to look at situations with new eyes. According to Gullestad, such critical reflection requires a secure feeling about one's background; she also underlines that the internalisation of concepts and categories can be used to predict the future and that gives one the feeling of control of one's life (2002: 66).

Narrative and experiential learning

Stories chosen had to be connected with the students' experiences and include a theme that has relevance to the course. This kind of experiential learning gives the students more space and attention. Direct experiences can also be used just for motivation, so that students become interested in a subject. However, after the interest is aroused, the teacher shifts into dealing with the 'real' subjects. Hoëm calls this way of using experience solely to arouse interests 'pseudo-recognition'. The teacher recognises an experience as 'bait' for the real interests of the course of instruction (1978, p.48). In AMS, experiences determined the themes that were dealt with, and the use of theories and concepts shed new light on the events. Using students' experiences in this way may make knowledge more attractive and provide it with valuable content (Hoëm, 1978, p.67). A closer analysis of experiential learning makes visible its didactic aspects: the fact that an experience has both a subjective and an objective function (Illeris, 1981, p.113). Subjective in this context means that the students see the experience as something that is relevant and of interest for them personally. In order to take into account the objective level of an experience, it is necessary to raise this from the personal level to a more social context and also to illuminate the social structures. Through experiential learning, the students were trained to shift the view of their experiences from a subjective to an objective perspective.

Tiller presents the process of experiential learning through a learning ladder, in which he distinguishes between different levels of learning. He emphasises that when people relate their experiences by sharing them with each other, but do not take the issue any further, they are not actually learning – they are only recounting. In order to complete the learning, experiences need to be categorised and systematised. Categorisation means that the students arrange the experiences according to their similarities, becoming gradually aware of some main patterns and forms. The challenge is to tie the categorised experiences together. To find clear categories means that it is easier to view how the experiences are similar and how they differ from each other. The higher we get on the learning ladder, the less bound the story is to a specific time and space. The experience becomes abstracted and it is quite a challenge to reach a high level of abstraction (Tiller, 1999, p.34). We noticed how the students struggled to enhance their capacities on a higher level of their learning ladder. If the facilitation of the learning process had solely let the stories be recounted, – which is actually a good way of sharing – the learning would have been minimised. Among other things, we would not have discerned phenomena that were connected with power relations, gender roles and ethnic and social differences. AMS challenged students to pay particular attention to such phenomena. Stories and experiences are, from the indigenous perspective, equal to theories (Kuokkanen, 2000.) They can give us insight on how knowledge and worldviews interrelate, and can open up new perspectives and raise consciousness.

Learning that stirs

In carrying out experiential learning, it is impossible to ignore the role of attitudes and feelings and this was apparent during the activities in AMS. The course was based on the unwritten idea that competence consists of knowledge, skills and know-how and

also emotions and attitudes. This means that emotions contribute to learning and have a significant effort on the learning process. What is the rationality behind this understanding of learning?

We quote Illeris who labels learning as something that includes emotional aspects as 'significant learning'. Such learning is a pervasive process that to some extent always hurts and disturbs the balance of a person (1981, p.87–88). In significant learning, stasis is broken and new knowledge may disturb one's harmony. Hoëm explains that when emotions are part of learning, education grows in value and provides understanding that the students assume as part of themselves (Hoëm, 197 p.67).

It is important that students feel socially secure, but facing disturbing resistance is also beneficial for their learning. Ziehe, also discusses the important role of contradictions in learning. He stresses that it is important to prepare for unexpected situations, doubts, uncertainty and contradictions, because they catalyse motivation (1978, p.94). Traditionally among Sámi, solving unexpected problems and the strength to endure pain are important capacities to learn. Balto highlights that, in order to become self-reliant, you have to learn to solve challenges. It is also possible to train to endure pain. The habit of letting small children handle knives at quite an early age is a well known Sámi tradition. The idea behind this is that children should learn to master the use of knife in a proper way on their own so that they will not hurt themselves or others. Balto notes that survival knowledge involves more than just practical skills: it includes the capacity to solve problems at a more abstract and cognitive level. Sámi prepare their children to solve sudden challenges and a readiness for unexpected situations. The skill to solve unforeseen challenges is one of the most valued skills we need to prepare ourselves for survival. According to Balto, the significance of this skill is also evident in Sámi heritage. This capacity gives a person mental readiness for survival as it enables him/her for instant problem solving. In addition, self-reliance increases a person's self-confidence (Balto 2008, p.60). When the students expressed that they had learned how to cope with cultural encounters, it might be that they did not find solutions for all the challenges. However, we expect that they started to be mentally better prepared to face them.

We realised how students' enthusiasm and eagerness was challenged when they themselves contributed something. Story telling as a new method to deal with cultural encounters could not improve the daily lives of students, but the method could guide their learning progress. The method requires that students engage themselves fully – their experiences, knowledge, intuition, emotions, discussions with others and whatever resources they might have – to enhance their understanding. Often, students were worried because they might not find solutions or 'right answers' in books; or also because the answer they arrived at was totally unexpected. The flexibility of such a learning process coaxed and stimulated the students to stretch their learning capacity.

And the story grows

What seemed to be a small story about trivial issues transformed into a story of much larger dimensions. This happens when students immersed themselves into the themes

of the study, and their understanding developed into a meta-level that enabled them to see individual events as part of a greater context. We can discern cultural and social patterns, political processes and historical backgrounds in the students' stories. When students succeeded in seeing the connections between the categories mentioned, the concepts and theoretical insights and their own personal interests and experiences, this provided yet new meaning. One important achievement in the study of theories was reached when the students realised how the term 'culture' could be used to either exclude or include people. To learn to know one's own and other people's cultural 'wrappings' is to pay attention to their cultural sensitivity; to learn to be less normative and more analytical. Often, students' stories revealed discrimination, oppression and contempt. The strategy is however, to shift the view from being victims of oppression to becoming pro-active in our attitudes and actions.

By working in the *searvelatnja* in safe surroundings, students felt more secure in analysing painful issues, conflicts and contradictions; and it also strengthened them so that they were able to look for possible solutions to problems. Such a process healed and empowered individual students, the group of students and, subsequently, their working environments and society. By focusing on story-telling as a method, might be one reason for the success of the study. The criteria for success here are both the good results, but also the wellbeing of the students and staff. Story telling reflects the traditional Sámi way of learning and we have faith that the sense of wellbeing derived from storytelling is familiar to the students and us, the instructors. The story has also grown in our respect – we have realised that, by providing room for narration, experiences, emotions and learning in the *searvelatnja*, our intuition has led us to the traditional Sámi methods of learning. As mentioned earlier, a person needs to withstand pain and to cope with unexpected situations and contradictions – and these were challenges implicit in the course. Such challenges may increase the students' capacity to manage, solve and cope with problems. Transferring these problem solving skills into new contexts, is a highly valuable level of learning.

While reflecting on the course, we realised that the indigenous perspective with its focus on power, the effect of colonisation and consciousness raising was an ever more prominent part of the growing story of the AMS training. In the period when these courses were carried out, the concept of decolonisation was not commonly used; however, we followed the principles of the decolonisation process. Today, the AMS training could be renewed to include the process of decolonisation and consciousness raising, for which Marie Battiste, Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Graham Hingangarao Smith paved the way. They highlight how indigenous peoples can reconceptualise the effects of colonisation, to improve their situation and dignity and build up self-determination in matters that concern them.

Our engagement in the development of Sámi society, both professionally and politically has naturally affected our professional interests, approach and curiosity. However, participation has also been an advantage in itself: through such engagement, one learns to see confrontations between individuals and groups of people; one also learns that such events arouse conflicts, pain and unpleasant feelings in people. We consider that the enhancement of cultural sensitivity and understanding is a suitable

instrument for creating better and healthier ways of social exchange and communication. To improve Sámi and indigenous societies, we emphasise that instead of victimising ourselves, we need to become proactive in the development of our societies. Being active members of Sámi society, we have, in the context of research, the obligation to be careful observers of our society, as Skjervheim reminds (1976). Indeed, the shifting between these roles has allowed us, together with the students, to increase our knowledge and enhance our understanding in the field. Regarding cultural sensitivity, we have become more conscious of how our ties may blind us to those who differ from us. Every now and then, we may also embrace our own kind too closely. This is up to the reader to assess.

References

Balto, A. (1997). *Sámi mánáidbajásgeassin nuppástuvvá.* Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal.

Balto, A. M. (2008). *Sámi oahpaheaddjit sirdet árbevirolas kultuvrra boahttevas buolvvaide. Dekoloniserema aksuvdnadutkamus Ruotabeale Sámis.* Periodical Diedut no. 4/2008. Guovdageaidnu: Sámi allaskuvla.

Barth, F. (1994). *Manifistasjon og prosess.* Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.

Battiste, M. (Ed.) (2000). *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Daes, E. I. (2000). Prologue. The experience of colonization around the world. In: Battiste, M. (Ed), *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision.* UBC Press.

Dahl, Ø. (2001). *Møter mellom menneske: interkulturell kommunikasjon.* Oslo : Gyldendal akademisk.

Gullestad, M. (2002). *Det norske sett med nye øyne.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Halvorsen, E. M. (2004). Kulturforståelse, kulturprocesser, identitet. – Guttorm, G. & Sandven, J. (eds): *Sløjden, minoritetene, det flerkulturelle og et internasjonalt perspektiv.* Techne-serien, Forskning i slöjdpedagogik och slöjdvetenskap B:13/2004. NordFo – Nordiskt Forum för Forskning och Utvecklingsarbete. Høgskolen i Telemark, Avdelningen for estetiske fag, folkekultur og lærerutdanning.

Hoëm, A. (1978). Kunnskapsoverføring som et sosialt fenomen. – Monsen et al: *Kunnskapssosiologi og skoleutvikling.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Høgmo, A. (1986). Det tredje alternativ. Barns læring av identitetsforvaltning i samisk-norske samfunn preget av identitetsskifte. *Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning*, Vol. 27, p.395–416.

Høgmo, A. (1998). *Fremmed i det norske hus. Innvandreres møte med bygdesamfunn, småby og storby.* Oslo: ad Notam Gyldendal.

Illeris, K. (1981). *Modkvalifiseringens pædagogik – problemorientering. Deltakerstyring og eksemplarisk indlæring.* København: Unge Pædagoger.

Kalleberg, R. (2002). Om vitenskapelig ydmykhet.I *Samiskforskning og forskningsetikk*, publikasjon nr. 2, Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komite for samfunnsvitenksap og humanoria (NESH), Oslo.

Kuokkanen, R. (2000). Towards an 'Indigenous Paradigm' from a Sámi perspective. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 20*(2), 411–436.

Kvernmo, S. & Stordahl, V. (1990). *Fra same til akademiker = fra deltaker til observatør.* SámiMedica no. 1/1990, p.4–10.

Laursen, P. F. (1997). Refleksivitet i didaktikken. – Jens Christian Jacobsen (ed.), *Refleksive læreprocesser* p.60–78. København: Forlaget Politisk Revy.

Nergård, J. I. (2006). *Den levende erfaring: en studie i samisk kunnskapstradisjon.* Oslo: Cappelen akademisk.

Sara, M. N. (2003). Sámi máhtut oahpahusas ja oahpponeavvuin. In Hirvonen, V. (ed.): *Sámi skuvla plánain ja praktihkas* p.121-138. Kárásjohka: Cálliid Lágádus.

Skjervheim, H. (1976). Deltaker og tilskodar. In Slagstad R. (red): *Positivisme, dialektikk, materialisme. Den norske debatten om samfunnsvitenskapens teori.* Universitetsforlaget, Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø.

Smith, G. H. (2003). Indigenous struggle for the transformation of education and schooling. Keynote Address to the Alaskan Federation of Natives Convention, Anchorage, USA.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples.* London: Zed Books.

Stordahl, V. (1998a). *Same i den moderne verden. Endring og kontinuitet i et samisk lokalsamfunn.* Kárásjohka: Davvi Girji O.S.

Stordahl, V. (1998b). Refleksjoner rundt utviklingen av samisk psykiatri. In Eidheim Harald/Stordahl Vigdis (red.): *Kulturmøte og terapi i Sapmi.* Davvi girji os, Karasjok.

Stordahl, V. (2008). Nation building through knowledge building: The discourse of Sámi higher education and research in Norway. In H. Minde, (ed.): *Indigenous peoples: Self-determination knowledge indigenity.* p.249-266. Delft: Eburon.

Tiller, T. (1999). *Aksjonslæring: forskende partnerskap i skolen.* Kristiansand: Høgskoleforlaget.

Wadel, C. (1990). Den samfunnsvitenskapelige konstruksjon av virkeligheten, Seek as, Flekkefjord.

Ziehe, T. (1978). *Subjektiv betydning og erfaring: Om Glocksee-skoleforsøgets didaktiske koncept.* – Kontext no. 35/1978 p.82-98.

Assistant Professor Asta Mitkijá Balto has been actively engaged in Sámi education for decades, she has been the Director of the Sámi Education Council and also elected Vice-Chancellor of Sámi University College. Her academic work is concentrated on her research on the transmission of culture. The traditional child rearing in Sámi families has been the main interest and her research findings have been recognized as a source for the development of Sámi pedagogy and Sámi education. Recently, she finished an action-research based project where Sámi primary/preschools in Sweden implemented these theories for practical use in their schools. Her books are published in Sámi and Norwegian and some articles are also available in English.
Email: asta-m.balto@samiskhs.no

Assistant professor Liv Østmo is one of the founders of the Sámi University College, where she also has been elected Dean. She has worked for years developing and lecturing on the study of multicultural understanding at the Sámi University College. Currently she is working on the project Árbediehtu, which develops methods for documentation, protection, storage and further development of traditional knowledge. These days she is finishing a method book for documentation of Sámi traditional knowledge.
Email: liv.ostmo@samiskhs.no