Interview with Christoph Wulf

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In addition to the articles published in Designs for Learning, each issue will also include an interview with a person who is prominent within any of the fields that relate to the themes of the journal. The readers of this issue have already made acquaintance with professor Christoph Wulf through his article on mimetic learning. In the interview that follows we hope to give some further insights regarding interests and influences that form a background to his theoretical work. A further contextualisation of his article, so to speak.

Christoph Wulf is professor of anthropology and philosophy of education and co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Historical Anthropology at the Free University Berlin. He is a member of the research training group The mise-en-scène of the body and of the collaborative research centre Cultures of Performance. Apart from his professorship at the Free University Berlin he is professor honoris causa at University of Bucharest; vice-chairman of the Society for Historical Anthropology; founder of the commission on Educational Anthropology in the German Society for Educational Science; member of the board of directors of the German commission for UNESCO; member of the Conseil scientifique of the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (Paris/Lyon) and of the International Research Centre for Cultural Sciences (Vienna). He has written extensively on topics relating to anthropology, philosophy, aesthetics, performativity and learning, among many other things.

FL: I think many of our readers would be interested in hearing about your research interests and how they are connected - the coherence between different aspects of your extensive work on various issues. Perhaps that could serve as a starting point for our conversation?

CW: Well, I have a couple of topics which I have dealt with during the last 30 years. One is, for example, related to issues which I assume to be most important for the future of mankind – the issues of peace, cultural diversity and sustainable development. That interest goes back to a period when I was involved in founding the Peace Education Commission within the International Peace Research Association in 1972. I now work on the board of directors of the German Commission for UNESCO and have similar engagements within the context of UNESCO.

Cultural diversity became a topic in the German - French youth exchange organization which I also was involved in for many years. In this context we did several studies on intercultural learning. The foundation of the Network Educational Science Amsterdam in the early nineties was another approach to develop education in Europe as an intercultural task. In this network as many as 30 European educational faculties worked together to help the East-European countries to get integrated into the democratic system of the European Union.

At the beginning of this century I initiated the foundation of a network, Philosophy and Anthropology of the Mediterranean. Within the network we organized two conferences in Alexandria. The first dealt with issues concerning violence and religion and was based on discussions between a number of researchers from the Muslim world and a number of European researchers. The second conference focused on the role of arts for the dialogue of cultures. A third one – which I am going to realize this year – will be on education and democracy.

I have, of course, other professional teams I work with – a Chinese one on intercultural issues, and a Japanese one on mimesis, poiesis and performativity in education (cf Suzuki & Wulf, 2007).

However, my main interest is actually related to what we call historical anthropology. In this field Dietmar Kamper and I published a series of fifteen books. We started our collaboration in 1980 and continued it for more than a decade. Our project "Logic and Passion" included more than two hundred researchers from all over Europe, from 30 disciplines and 15 countries. The idea was to do interdisciplinary and international research. We wanted to understand our world and ourselves by becoming aware that we live in a particular historical and cultural situation. To understand what that means, we need the comparison with other historical periods in Europe and we need the comparison with other cultures. So we developed a diachronic and a synchronic approach.

One of the books of this series became especially important; its title was "The Return of the Body" (Kamper & Wulf, 1982). At that time people thought it was a very peculiar title, but today the body is in the centre of cultural sciences in Europe. In my view the central role of the body in the cultural sciences and in the historical anthropology is due to the Death of God in the sense of Nietzsche and the Death of Man, in the sense of Foucault. This situation implies the end of the normative anthropological system which was based on Christianity and on the European white male human being as the model for humanity. For a long time we thought that we were the model of the world. When the dominance of a normative anthropology came to an end – what is the actual situation in anthropology? As I said, in my view the body is in the centre of anthropological research today. What does that mean? How can the cultural input and the formation of the body be described? I still think...
it’s worthwhile to continue to do research on the body as the challenging topic in cultural sciences.

We worked in the field of an anthropology of the senses, including the relation between the senses. What does the dominance of the view in our culture mean for the other senses? In another project called “The body in parts. A cultural anatomy” (see Benthien & Wulf, 2001), we did research on the cultural significance of different body parts like the stomach, the back, the nose or the hair. What is the symbolic meaning of body parts in our culture? It became a very interesting book.

We have founded a Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich) on Cultures of Performance involving twenty research projects. We started nine years ago and we will continue our research for three more years. The central idea focuses on performance cultures. It means we are interested in the theatrical side, or the mise en scene and the staging of the social. All this research also focuses on the body.

I am also involved in a comprehensive research project on representations and practices of birth. My interest is to rediscover the importance of birth; everybody is interested in death. Birth is not a topic in the cultural sciences. I want to change this situation. Besides an empirical research project we just organized an international conference on “the imaginary of birth”.

FL: So you work to bring the body back into culture.

CW: Yeah, and in very different ways. Also the question “what is life” is of great interest for us. What does life mean today? How do we figure it out? Related to anthropology of the body is also the soul and its role in European history. Psychology is no longer interested in the soul; but during 2000 years the soul was of central concern in Europe. We worked on an historical reconstruction of the soul in Europe. We organized a project on the love discourse in Europe. How it developed. This discourse is quite unique. In China for example they have a very different conception of love.

During the last years I got even more interested in the synchronic perspective of anthropology. I have become influenced by cultural anthropology, or ethnology. On that basis I got interested in rituals and gestures. The body plays an important role here, too. We developed an ethnographic research project “The Berlin Study on Rituals”, where we tried to rediscover the productive and creative side of rituals. Due to national socialism and to the student movement we have views on rituals in Germany which are very critical and focus only on the negative side. You can misuse rituals to suppress people. Being aware of all this, we have forgotten the creative sides of rituals. The main idea is that there is no community life without rituals and ritualisation. We try to prove how central the role of rituals is for education, the formation of the social and for learning. We wrote three books in this field and elaborated ten doctoral theses focusing on the children and their families in one inner city school in Berlin. It’s a very complex case study.

This Berlin Study on Rituals and Gestures marks a new period, a new paradigm in anthropology. My concept of anthropology implies five paradigms. The first one is the paradigm of the evolution, and humanization. It is extremely important that we consider the human being as part of life. This aspect implies, of course, methods of the natural sciences, too.

The second big paradigm is philosophical anthropology. It has its origin in Germany. It is represented by Gehlen, Scheler and Plessner whose interest lies in a comparison between the human being and other primates. They want to show what is characteristic for the human being, for example the fact that the human being is an acting being and creates its world by action. The evolution approach and the philosophical anthropology approach focus on the human being in a general and universal sense.

We are even more interested in the historical and cultural differences between human beings. So we studied anthropology in history. This approach has its origins in France, on the basis of work of the École des Annales. Here research focuses how mentalities develop and how feelings are learnt collectively in different historical periods.

The fourth paradigm is related to cultural anthropology, or ethnology. Here we do research with ethnographic methods. There is a focus on the individual and on differences between individuals.

Our paradigm of anthropology is called historical and cultural anthropology. We try to combine these four paradigms. In our work we have a few assumptions: the first one is that there is a double historicity and double culturality that we always have to take into consideration. Second we want to enlarge the complexity in anthropology and in the social sciences. Third we need a multiplicity of research methods. That means historical reconstruction, philosophical reflection and empirical research. These three methods are the main methods of anthropological research today. Beside that anthropology has to be interdisciplinary and transnational. It has to use a multiplicity of approaches in order to create the anthropological complexity we search for. We therefore try to work in a transdisciplinary and transnational way.

Fifteen years ago, I created the commission Educational Anthropology in the German Society for Educational Science. We meet every year and ex-
change our research findings on different issues. Time and space in education, generation, anthropology of educational institutions were important themes. Right now, we work on the imaginary of birth and the educational practices related to it. The next conference will be on the formation of the body. All these themes are interrelated. I am also very interested in religion and the sacred in society and in communities. This interest also has an influence on the “Berlin Studies on Rituals” in which we focus this dimension, too.

During many years I continued to do research in the field of mimesis, imagination and aesthetic education (see Imai & Wulf, 2006). One of my books on mimesis was already published at California University Press in the nineties (Gebauer & Wulf, 1996). A collective book on “The dynamics and performativity of imagination. The image between the visible and the invisible” will be out this fall or next spring at Routledge. I am fascinated by difficult subjects. They are often so complex that you do not manage to deal with them adequately. That makes you feel humble. You get aware of the limits of what you can know. That experience has an impact on the way you meet other human beings. This attitude even has ethical implications.

Learning is another of these complex issues. In my view the concept of learning is often used in a too restricted way. It refers only to cognitive learning and learning to know. It does not focus learning how to act and how to live together and how to be. What Ranke said to characterize historical periods is also true for individuals and children. Each child is unique and has to be treated in accordance with his or her uniqueness. I am still very much in favour of the concept of “bildung”. When we talk about “bildung” we assume that in this process learning is an active process, determined by the individual child. Consequently I am also in favour of discovery learning, heuristic learning, trying to stimulate the creativity in each single child.

References