ARENA MODEL

IDO ABRAM, May 2008

The Arena model is a model for intercultural learning. It is also a general model for learning and communicating. Three pairs of concepts are relevant: stage-battleground, identity-imago and dialogue-conflict. As will be explained below, "identity circles" are instrumental in visualizing identity.

Identity and Imago

Identity always relates to yourself. It reflects your how you feel about life in general, and how you perceive the rest of the world. It is the story you tell about yourself. That story never ends and changes throughout your lifetime. Identity thus becomes a dynamic concept. "Identity" and "self-image" are used synonymously. Identity and self-image indicate how people see, experience and appreciate themselves, and how they express this. "Imago" is the counterpart to these terms,[1] a mirror image. It refers to the image that others have of somebody and to expressions of this image. Alternatively: identity is self-definition, imago is the identity that others impose on you.[2] In still other words: imago is biography, identity is autobiography.

Here, we will discuss only the identity and the imago of *people*. Individual preferences for or personal visions of something or somebody pertain to both identity and imago. We will *not* address the identity or the imago of other "species": animals, plants, objects, places, etc.

Others perceive a person in many different ways, basically in as many ways as there are others. When we mention the imago of an individual, we are selecting – consciously or subconsciously – the characteristics of that individual that we consider to be the most pronounced or striking. When we mention the identity of a person, he or she selects those characteristics on his or her own.

Groups

A "group" consists of two of more persons who have at least one characteristic in common. This characteristic may be real, but it can just as easily be hypothetical, presumed, or attributed. Groups are also said to have their own identity: female identity, male identity, Dutch identity, European identity, the identity of a school, and the like. Determining what is "own" about the group identity usually relates to a desirable sense of self. That "own" aspect needs to be instilled and preferably incorporated in one's lifestyle.[3] What is "own", characteristic, or typical about a group reflects different areas of experience that serve as a cohesive force between members of a group. These shared areas of experiences are therefore also known as "bonds" – sort of like family ties. There is a common involvement in things that apparently matter, in things considered important, in values the members aim to preserve. Areas of experience are therefore also called value areas.

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[1] *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (1995, 12th edition): "**counterpart**, person or thing that resembles another and forms or could form a pair with it, synonym: *pendant*".

[2] *Informatiebrochure Programma Sociale Cohesie*. Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek / Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research / NWO, The Hague, May 2000, p. 19.

[3] The last two sentences in the text paraphrase selected passages from a column by Jan Blokker: "Prinses Máxima stapte in een kwal", *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 October 2007.

The counterpart of group identity is group imago. The impression among non-Dutch of the Netherlands is known as the Dutch imago. The way that women see men is the male imago. The way that men think and speak about themselves reflects the male identity.

Examples of groups include 'families, tribes, villages, associations, churches, companies, nations and the like,' as well as less obvious group contexts, such as people involved in 'meetings, competitions, strikes, wars, revolutions.'[4] Groups may bother each other and despise each other, but they may also help each other or learn from each other. Because each group has its own codes, institutes, language (or vernacular), history, technology, and symbolism, abbreviated to "culture", when groups (and members of groups) learn from each other and get to know each other, they engage in "intercultural learning".

With groups, determining who the members are can be difficult. In a school, would these be the teachers and students, or would they also include parents and support staff? Based on the school as it is today, or based on the school since its establishment? At a zoo, do the people who work there belong, or are the visitors part of it as well? If war is a group experience (see above), who constitutes that? Are they the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders – and, if so, who are they? Are there some people who do not belong to any of these three subgroups – e.g. babies? Does a religion consist of only the believers, or does it include former believers as well?

Only once we agree on who the group members are, can we make sense of the group identity and the group imago. Even then, however, we need to apply these concepts with caution. Just as cautiously as we would apply other generalizations.

Example: the Netherlands

Let us take the Netherlands as an example. "For centuries foreigners visiting the Netherlands have attributed certain characteristics to the inhabitants. These are 'typically Dutch' things, such as our strong corporatist sentiment, or, more basically, the polder model. Those foreigners are not talking out of their hat. Conversely: suppose I were to assert that the Netherlands has traditionally been a country of contrasts and extremes, that the Dutch are exuberant and passionate hedonists, that a 'winner takes all' mentality prevails, and that we thrive on displays of wealth and courteous interactions – then everybody somewhat familiar with the truth would frown to say the least."[5] So there must be something that we can describe as the Dutch identity and the Dutch imago. We should not presume, however, that everybody knows exactly what this means or interprets it exactly the same way.

Others, however, prefer to avoid disputable, subjective or vague concepts whenever possible: "Circumvent them with careful consideration, examine them from all angles, but do not engage with them; basically, treat them as you would a huge jellyfish on the beach."[6] We *do* apply the identity and imago concepts, because little would be left of the language, if we were

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[4] Elias, N. *What is Sociology?* Hutchinson , London, 1978. Dutch translation: *Wat is sociologie?* Spectrum, Utrecht / Antwerp, 1971. Quoted from J. Goudsblom in his 'Voorwoord bij de Nederlandse vertaling.' [Preface to the Dutch translation] Elias (1971), p. 7.

[5] Frits van Oostrom. 'Identiteit? Praat liever over binding'. *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 October 2007. Van Oostrom chairs the Canon van Nederland committee, is a university professor in Utrecht, and serves as president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

[6] Historian Ernst Kossmann, quoted in Blokker (2007).

to omit all words with unclear or multiple meanings. This drastic measure is unnecessary. The meaning of a word becomes easier to grasp, once we know how it is and has been used. "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[7]

Belonging to a group

Each individual belongs to multiple groups and is thus associated with multiple group identities / group imagos. Progressive globalization has led these groups to multiply. "We are all part of the personal, the local, the national, the universal and the global."[8] Not all groups to which an individual belongs are equally important to him or her. Groups providing their members with minimal "social status [human dignity], safety and help" are important to them.[9] Groups that matter today may become irrelevant tomorrow. Other groups may suddenly become important.

What are the groups we can belong to? Everybody has been part of some groups for a while: children. Many of us will one day become part of some: parents. There are two groups that we belong to throughout our lives: women or men. We can be part of a religious community or a family. Members join some groups through election or selection: parliament or the Dutch football team. Other groups are optional: newspaper subscribers.

Intertwinement of individuals and groups

Individuals have both an identity and an imago. The same holds true for groups. Making the distinction between individuals and groups absolute is a common mistake. The distinction, however, refers to mutual dependence and reciprocal involvement, especially if someone cares deeply about belonging to a certain group. The relation between a person and a group that is important to that person is like an interwoven structure or a network. 'The society' in which a person lives, for example, is a group that is important to almost everyone.

'The contrast, which is repeatedly drawn between "individual" and "society" makes it seem as though individuals could in some sense exist independently of society, and *vice versa*. This seems highly questionable in the light of models showing processes of interweaving. (…). Looking through sociology textbooks one finds many technical terms which convey the impression of referring to isolated and motionless objects; yet on closer scrutiny they refer to people who are or were constantly moving and constantly relating to other people. Think of concepts like norm and value, structure and function, social class or social system. The very concept of society has this character of an isolated object in a state of rest, and so has that of nature. The same goes for the concept of an individual. Consequently we always feel impelled to make quite senseless conceptual distinctions, like "the individual" and "society" were two separate things, like tables and chairs, or pots and pans. One can find oneself caught up in long discussions of the nature of the relationship between these two apparently separate objects. Yet on another level of awareness one may know perfectly well that societies are composed of individuals, and that individuals can only possess specifically human

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[7] Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, Part 1, paragraph 43.

[8] Hollak, R. "De chaos laat zich niet vangen in simpele denkschema's". *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 October 2001.

[9] Rabbie, J.M. "Over het ontstaan van samenhorigheid en cohesie binnen groepen en van rivaliteit en vijandigheid tussen groepen". *Leuvense Perspectieven* 46 (May 1992), p. 160. Rabbie describes Kurt Lewin's view in this article.

characteristics such as their abilities to speak, think and love, in and through their relationships with other people – "in society".'[10]

Simple sentences such as "I am a Dutch teacher" and "He is bullied at school" reveal the intertwinement intended here. Likewise, individual identity is intertwined with the identities of the groups to which he or she belongs. And the same holds true for imago.

Conflict and Dialogue

The discrepancy between identity and imago causes tension and conflict but may instigate dialogue as well. Dialogue promotes exchanges, openness, and mutual interest. Dialogue is not an outlandish or a naive concept. Dialogue may be critical, provided such criticism is constructive. Most everyday conflicts, as well as major political squabbles, are solved through this approach. Conflicts generally yield both winners and losers. Dialogues, on the other hand, have only winners. That is why dialogue is more rewarding than conflict, and why peace is preferable to war. Maybe not always immediately, but definitely in the long run. But some impasses may be impossible to resolve. If two parties have one hundred percent differences of opinion, are each one hundred percent convinced that they are right, and are completely unwilling to compromise, then the conflict is impossible to solve. But such opponents hardly ever exist in real life – and even if they occur, this does not mean that "sworn enemies" will remain so forever. Dialogue and conflict therefore deserve to be regarded as counterparts rather than as antitheses.

Majority and minority groups

Society has majority and minority groups, groups with more and groups with less power. Over time, we observe shifts in these balances of power: not every majority group remains in power, and not every minority group stays powerless. Here, too, dynamics are a factor. Changing "balances of power (…) form an integral element of all human relationships."[11] What happens in macro-society resurfaces at micro-levels, for example in families. From birth and for many years afterwards, children are a minority group and their parents a majority group. Once the children are grown and the parents elderly, the roles may be reversed.

More powerful = Better?

What do we know about the less powerful groups, or, more specifically: what do we know of the identities of the dozens of minority groups in the world? Or: what do we know about the identity of children, the unemployed, the elderly and the sick? Often very little, unless we belong to one (or more) of those groups ourselves. What is the reason for this ignorance and disinterest? "We observe time and again that people who belong to groups that are more *powerful* than other groups with which they interact consider themselves to be *better* human beings than the others."[12] People who consider themselves to be superior are ordinarily disinterested in people they deem to be inferior. The moment they determine that a certain group is inferior, they tend to lose interest in the identity of that group, which is how that

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[10] Elias (1978), p. 98, 113.
[11] Elias (1978), p. 74.
[12] Elias, N. "Een theoretisch essay over gevestigden en buitenstaanders." In: Elias, N. & Scotson, J.L. *De gevestigden en de buitenstaanders. Een studie van de spanningen en machtsverhoudingen tussen twee arbeidersbuurten*. Spectrum, Utrecht / Antwerp, 1976, p. 7. Originally published in English: *The Established and the Outsiders. A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*, Frank Cass & Co, London, 1965.

group perceives, experiences, appreciates and expresses itself. They are satisfied with their own impression of this group: this is the imago, which is of course expressed in negative terms. This is how minority groups acquire their negative imago, and thus become stigmatized, and how majority groups negate or ignore the identity of minority groups. It is the breeding ground of the oppression of one random group by another, more powerful group and may give rise to violence and conflicts.

Deviations from the doom scenario described here are conceivable as well: minority groups that are idealized rather than demonized and attributed an excessively positive imago. Examples include "*le bon sauvage*" (the noble savage) of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as parents unwilling to acknowledge the mistakes of their children: "everybody believes that his or her own is best." But these cases are exceptions to the rule that minority groups get the short end of the stick and are underappreciated.

The moment a minority group gains self-awareness, the oppressive force starts to be undermined: "The colonized, like Jews or blacks, should not disavow or conceal themselves to disarm their respective racist opponents. They should demand to be accepted as they are, including their differences."[13] Emancipation of minority groups and acceptance of their identities – minority identities – by majority groups are two sides of a single issue.

Equivalency of identity and imago

The main point is that identity and imago are images that overlap in some areas but never coincide perfectly. Is it possible for them to have nothing in common? In theory, perhaps this is true, but not in practice. Identity and imago exert reciprocal influences, at least if any form of mutual communication exists, however minimal. Imago always resounds in identity and – vice versa. Any statements or reflections that focus exclusively on identity or exclusively on imago should take this into consideration.

Identity and imago may both be biased and untrue but may just as easily be honest and accurate. No single intellectual or logical argument is conceivable for attributing greater value from the outset to either image. The two images therefore deserve the same chance to prove their merits. Perceiving them as equivalent and treating them as such is a matter of integrity.

For example[14]: "Confronted with a proposition, view, belief, image, hypothesis, conviction – one's own or another person's – you should ask yourself seven questions: (1) what does this mean? (2) What speaks for it and (3) against it? (4) What alternatives are available? (5) What speaks for and (6) against each? And (7) what alternatives are most plausible or revealing in the light of these considerations?"

Identity circles
Segment circles may feature a simple, playful visualization of a person's identity. The segments accommodate personal characteristics, and what that person considers to be

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[13] Memmi, A. *Racisme hoezo? Ontmaskering van een onderdrukkingsmechanisme.* Transkulturele uitgeverij Masusa, 1983, Note 40.
[14] Kaufmann, W. *Without Guilt and Justice. From Decidophobia to Autonomy.* Peter H. Wyden, New York, 1973, p. 178. The philosopher Walter Kaufmann has called this series of stages "the canon" and has described it as "the heart of rationality, the essence of scientific method , and the meaning of intellectual integrity" (also p. 178). We have added the words "image" and "revealing" to the canon.

important. That is why such circles are known as identity or ID circles.[15] The actual person draws his or her circle. He or she draws what is most important largest, and what is less important smaller. The result is a time-based image, like a snapshot.
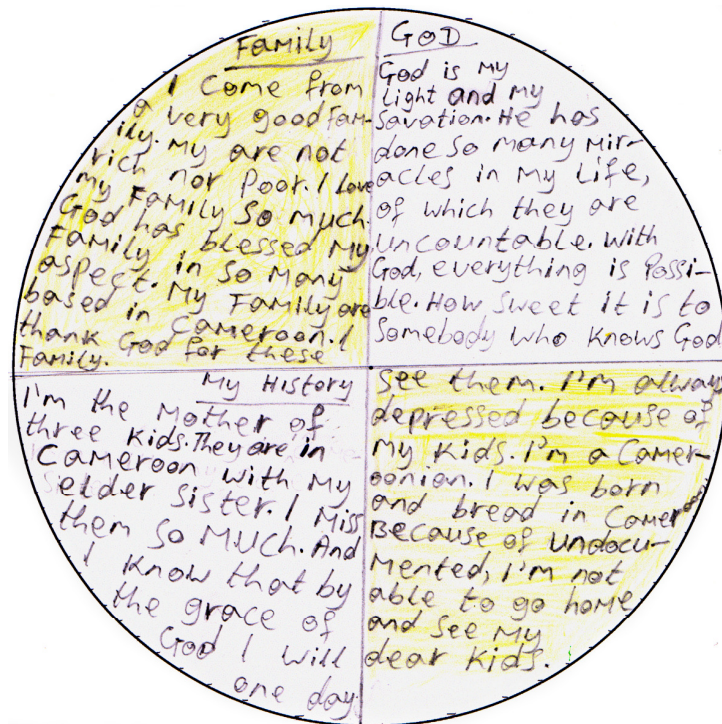

African woman in Amsterdam

Segments may also be focused on *specific* (sub) themes, such as health, poverty, or my favourite place. Focussing has the advantage of visualizing part of the identity more clearly. The disadvantage is that the contours of the total image fade or even disappear altogether. But this is inherent to "zooming in" (focussing) and "zooming out".

If it is unclear which segments are more important, all will be drawn the same size. The segments may be animated in several ways, for example by illustrating them with quotations, poems, stories, drawings, music, photographs, or video recordings.

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[15] Abram, I. & Wesly, J. *Knowing Me, Knowing You. Identity and intercultural dialogue.* Forum / Ger Guijs, Utrecht / Rotterdam, 2006.
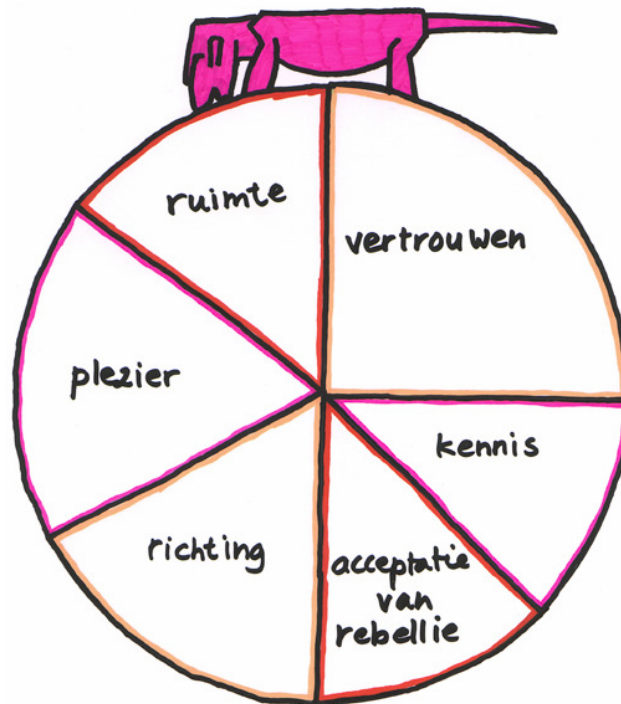
Visual artist Hogeschool voor de Kunsten

In the Netherlands ID circles have been used as instrumental aids in thirty projects conducted about a variety of themes. Often participants were asked in advance to bring an object with them that related something about themselves, as well as about the theme. They would deliver an oral presentation about it at the first session. Projects were conducted for tots and elderly, men and women, for people from various cultural and national backgrounds, as well as for combinations of the above. The youngest participant thus far was 4 and the oldest 93. Each project turned out to revolve around matters important to the participants, such as family (the living and the dead), work, friendship, religion, home, celebrations, respect, health, hobbies, money, travel, and the like. All typical identity traits.[16]

The projects enabled participants to cut and paste and draw and write their own identities. Audiovisual and digital applications of the ID-circles should be forthcoming soon.

Arena model

The **Arena model**, which used to be known as the ABCD model or the ABCD crown, elucidates the above.[17] The three core concepts of the model are Arena (A), Both (B) images: identity and imago, and Contacts (C).

Arena can denote both a battleground and a stage. It is the context in which learning and other forms of communication occur.

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[16] Seven projects are described in Abram & Wesly (2006).

[17] The Arena model derives from what used to be known as the ABCD model or the ABCD crown. See Abram, I. "Alle tranen zijn zout. Over intercultureel leren in opvoeding en onderwijs." In: Rupp, J.C.C. & Veugelers, W. (eds). *Moreel-politieke heroriëntatie in het onderwijs.* Antwerp / Apeldoorn, Garant, 2003, pp. 211-250. The version of the Arena model presented here is a simplification of the Arena model that appears in Abram & Wesly (2006).

Images (plural) refer to identity *and* imago.

– Identity or self image indicates how people perceive, experience, and appreciate themselves, and how they express this. Imago is the counterpart to this, the counter image. It denotes the image that others have of a person and expresses these perceptions.
– Identity is self-definition, imago is the identity that others impose.
– Imago is biography, identity is autobiography.
– Groups also have an identity and an imago.

Identity and imago overlap, as do autobiography and biography. They never coincide entirely (discrepancy).

Contacts (plural) denote conflict *and* dialogue.

The discrepancy between identity and imago gives rise to tension and conflict but may also be the beginning of a dialogue.

– Conflicts generally yield both winners *and* losers. Dialogues have only winners.
– Dialogues target interactions, openness, and reciprocal interest.
– Dialogue may be critical, provided such criticism is constructive.

Intercultural learning occurs in arenas, where

– there is space for images of and about somebody (identity and imago)
– contacts are established (conflict and dialogue)
– dialogue (encounter) is ultimately more rewarding than conflict (confrontation)
– conflicts are acknowledged and converted into dialogue.

Not all conflicts can be solved. A safe, warm stage promotes dialogue and intercultural learning. A hostile, cold battleground, on the other hand, obstructs both processes and heightens conflict.

Diagram 1: **Arena model for intercultural learning**

A = Arena: battleground and stage
B = Both images: identity and imago
C = Contacts: conflict and dialogue
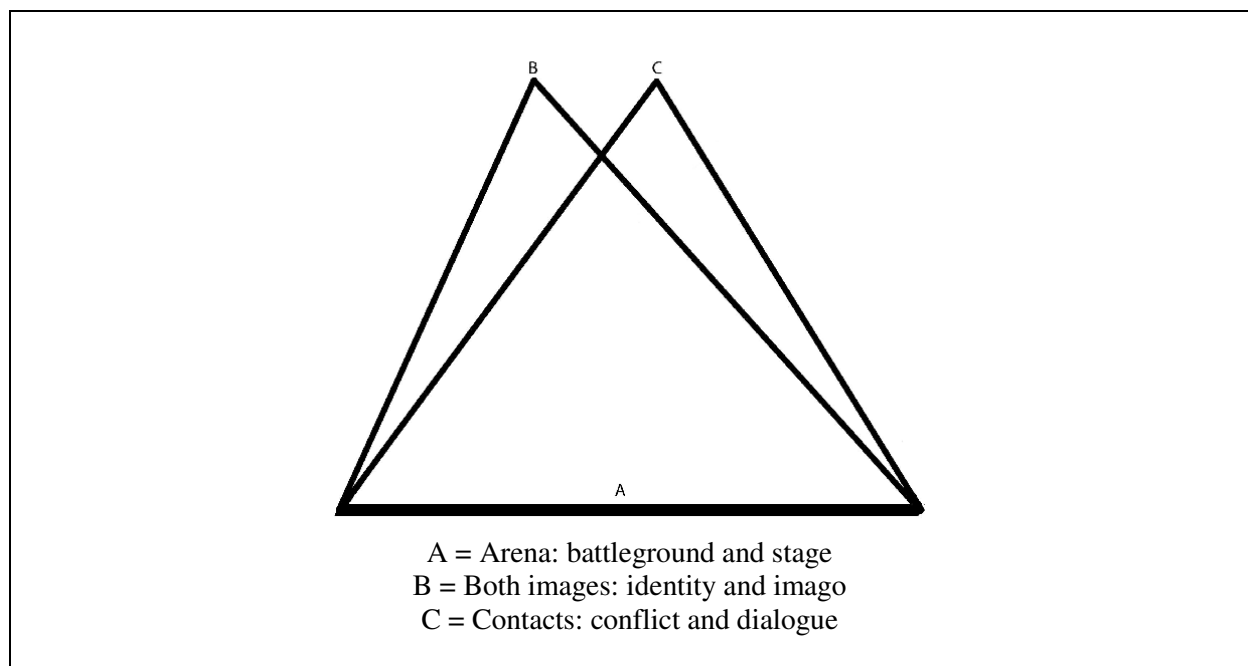
In the figure – the ABC crown – the triangles overlap. This means that especially the word pairs battleground-stage, identity-imago, and conflict-dialogue each associate two concepts that are intertwined, and that influence and relate to one another. Each human life in any arena reflects this.

Like "cold" and "hot", battleground-stage, identity-imago and conflict-dialogue may be positioned along a continuum, depicted by a horizontal line (of points).

cold _____ hot

The further left a point appears on this line, the colder it is. The further right, the hotter it is. This depiction illustrates that "hot" and "cold" are not mutually exclusive concepts but are the extremes of a broad spectrum.

Diagram 2 below features the same visualization of the battleground-stage, identity-imago and conflict-dialogue pairs. It reveals the above intertwinement, influencing, and mutual relation still more clearly than Diagram 1.

Diagram 2: **The ABC of intercultural learning**

ARENA
stage _____ battleground

BOTH IMAGES
identity _____ imago

CONTACT
conflict _____ dialogue
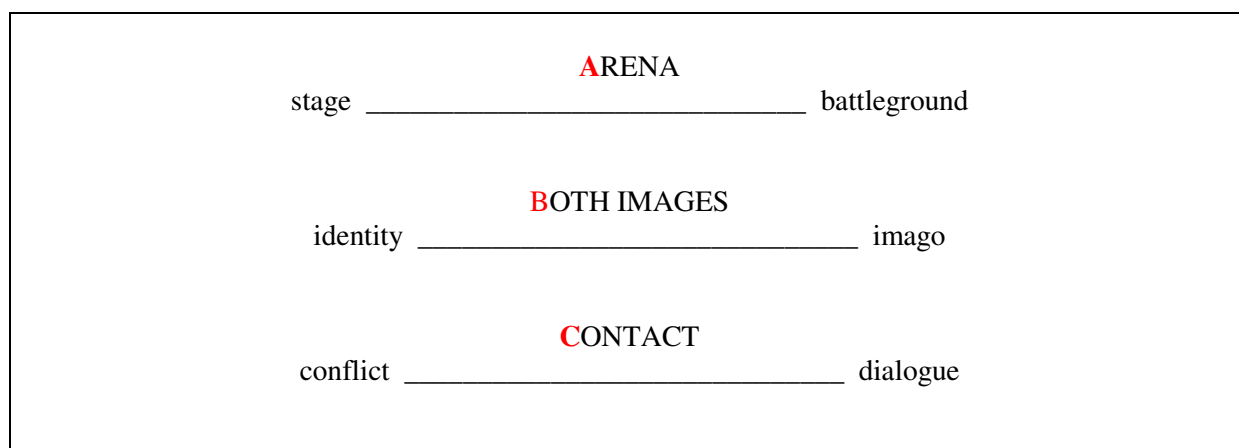
Diagrams 1 and 2 simply illustrate the ideas we have devised. In this sense they are comparable to identity circles. The Arena model – the ABC model or the ABC crown – may be perceived as learning the alphabet or at least the rudiments of the alphabet. Since each person is a world of his or her own, all successful forms of learning are by definition intercultural: getting to know yourself via others and others via yourself. That is why "intercultural learning" is the same as "learning" or should be perceived as such. If the word "intercultural" is omitted
- Diagram 1 becomes: **Arena model for learning**,
- Diagram 2 becomes: **The ABC of learning**,
- The Arena model becomes a: **general model for learning**.

General applications for the model

Like breathing, drinking, and eating, learning is a basic human activity. Still, the Arena model is not universally applicable. Not everybody agrees with the assumption that "dialogue is ultimately more rewarding than conflict."

People or institutes claiming to have a monopoly on the truth feel no need to enter a dialogue with those who believe otherwise. They see such an exercise as a waste of time and energy. Such a dialogue moreover entails the danger that those who believe otherwise might "contaminate" the truth. Religious fundamentalists therefore oppose dialogue on principle. This is equally true of political fundamentalists, such as the Nazis under Hitler or the "white power" racists in the United States.

Others who are opposed to dialogue include persons or institutions who think they are unbeatable. They believe they can win all conflicts and therefore opt for confrontation. History teaches that this is a misperception. No person or organization is "eternally" invincible. Nor are any states or empires invincible.
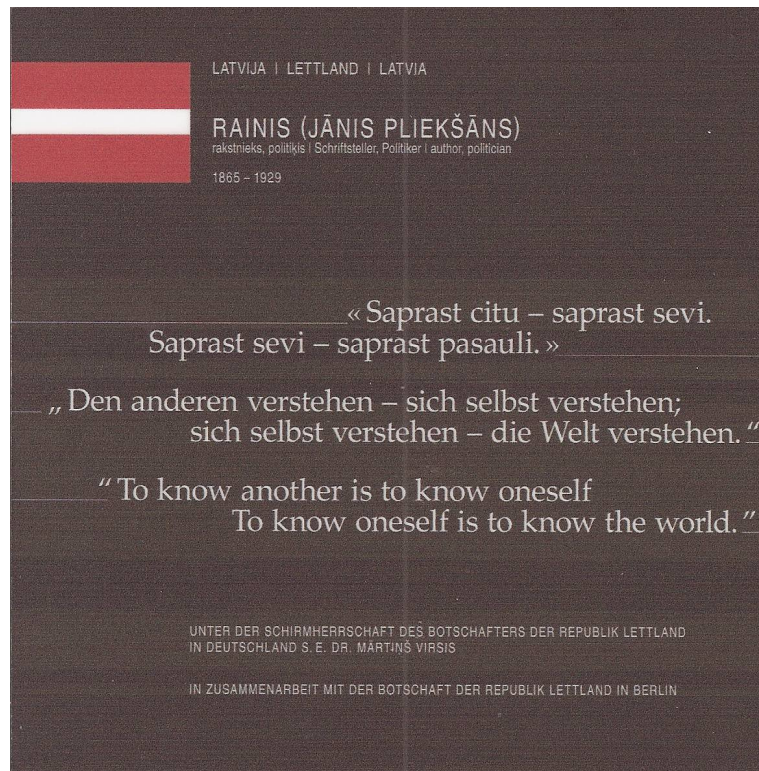
Actors who think they are omniscient or believe they are invincible refuse to engage in dialogue. Conflicts in which they are cast as the lead are difficult to resolve peacefully. Still, they are numerically – not ideologically – a virtually negligible share of mankind. Even those who refer to themselves as "fundamentalists" or as "supremely powerful" or are described as such by others in practice prove receptive to limited forms of dialogue exchange.

The strength of the Arena model lies in its highly versatile applications in many different situations. These situations (arenas) may range from a bloody battlefield to an attentive classroom of students. The many applications are depicted in Diagram 1: A may be attained via B and C. One may enter the A(rena), based on the positive or negative images that the parties concerned have of one another. But this may also be accomplished via the conflicts and tensions that prevail in the arena. Alternatively, the arena may be used to experiment with new forms of dialogue and communication. The situation determines where it would be wise or worthwhile to start. Whichever entrance is selected, all meanings that the letters B and C denote are relevant:
  – identity and imago
  – conflict (confrontation) and dialogue (encounter)
B and C are like doors and windows that may be opened to connect the inside with the outside. "To know another is to know oneself. To know oneself is to know the world."[18]

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[18] Janis Rainis (1865–1929), Latvia's most famous poet. Rainis was an ardent Latvian patriot who at the same time repudiated nationalistic narrow-mindedness and provincialism.

LATVIJA | LETTLAND | LATVIA

RAINIS (JĀNIS PLIEKŠĀNS)
rakstnieks, politiķis | Schriftsteller, Politiker | author, politician
1865 – 1929

« Saprast citu – saprast sevi.
Saprast sevi – saprast pasauli. »

„ Den anderen verstehen – sich selbst verstehen;
sich selbst verstehen – die Welt verstehen. "

" To know another is to know oneself
To know oneself is to know the world. "

UNTER DER SCHIRMHERRSCHAFT DES BOTSCHAFTERS DER REPUBLIK LETTLAND
IN DEUTSCHLAND S. E. DR. MĀRTIŅŠ VIRSIS

IN ZUSAMMENARBEIT MIT DER BOTSCHAFT DER REPUBLIK LETTLAND IN BERLIN

Plaque, embedded in a pavement in Berlin (*Pfad der Visionäre* / Path of Visionaries)

A N N E X

## How to make an identity circle or an ID circle.

Anybody can make an ID circle, young or old, alone or in a group, at home or at work.

1. Pick somebody or something that is important to you: which persons, pursuits, hobbies, objects, ideals, objectives, and the like. Remember everything or jot down key words.
2. Arrange the key words in order of importance.
3. Divide an empty circle in 'pie slices': make the most important pie slices large and the less important ones smaller.
4. Place the key words in the pie slices.
5. Add texts, drawings, colours, photographs or collages to the pie slices.

Some circle makers take a slightly different approach. Instead of making pie slices, they use other shapes: small circles in the large ID circle and / or an eye or cloud or other small touch here and there. Some use the empty space outside the ID circle as well. Anything goes.
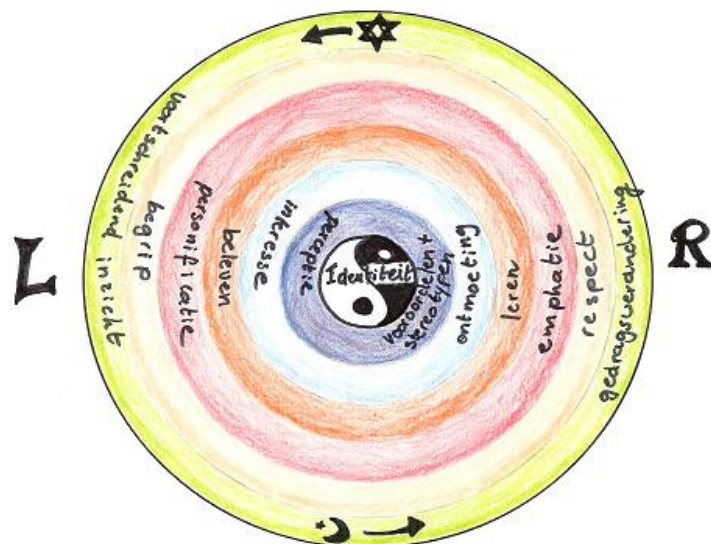
Women from the Dialogue Commission of the Liberal Jewish Community in Amsterdam

[Translated by Lee K. Mitzman]