

Cultural Diversity and Concepts of Intercultural Learning in Germany: Problems and Perspectives

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The topic of this conference is "accommodating Differences". These two expressions are by no means self-explanatory and suggest a more detailed analysis. Let me, therefore, ask two questions:

1. What do we understand by "accommodating"?
- and,
2. What is actually different when we speak of "differences"?

In answer to the first question Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English, among other things defines "accommodate" in the following way : " to change (esp. oneself) to fit new conditions" and "accommodating" as: "willing to help or make changes to suit new conditions". The OALD said: "adapt, harmonise; get into agreement or into adjustment".

So what, then, is the essential idea of "accommodating differences"? Is it the idea of change, presumably of individuals but also of institutions (like schools, for example) and society at large, as suggested in the first definition? Or is it the idea of adjustment, harmonising, which sounds to me more like giving up certain cultural patterns, one might assume those of minorities and adopting others, presumably those of dominant groups or of the dominant society.

Whichever way we look at the question there is always the element of power involved, of economic and political privileges, and of social status. Who has the power to enforce change and who has to accept change, willingly or unwillingly? Who has the power to stigmatise, i.e. declare certain cultural practices inferior, and who is the victim of such stigmatisation? So, to my mind, at the core of any concept of accommodation there is the question of political and social power.

But what do we want to understand by "accommodating"? Is the emphasis on compromise, on reconciliation? We must be very aware that this would mean a person or a group of persons having to give up certain features of their way of life that constitute differences, be they cultural practices, attitudes and values, behavioural patterns, or ways of thinking.

On the other hand should the emphasis be on the right to maintain - and I use the word quite consciously - a separate way of life, be it cultural traditions, religion, language, or identity. This leads to the questions relating to how a society can maintain its unity, how much

fragmentation and particularity a society can allow without disintegration. We're walking on rather thin ice here: not violating people's human rights to live their lives according to their own free will, which should include the right to a certain cultural tradition (language, religion, values, rituals etc.), and guaranteeing the unity of a community with a set of common and shared political and cultural assumptions independent of the different individuals and groups that constitute that community.

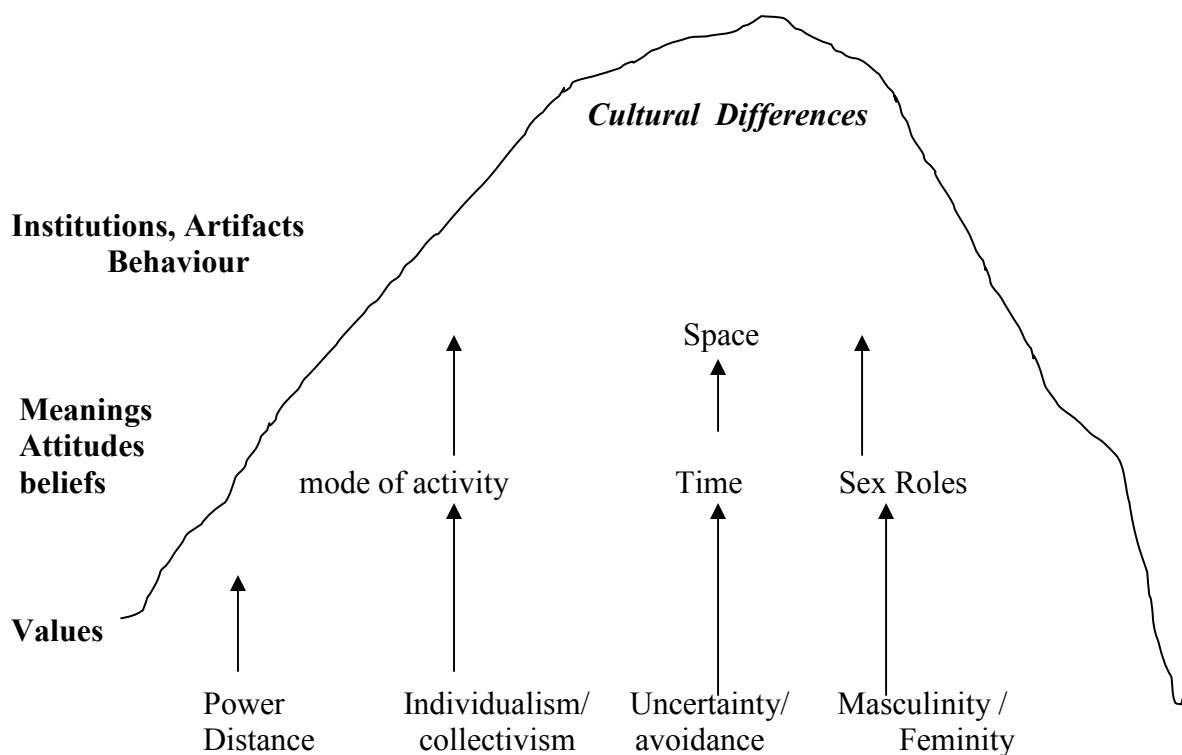
Let us now examine the second question: What actually is different when we speak of cultural differences? In many publications, conference papers and official speeches related to this theme, "gender, religion, race, age" and something that is called "social background" are mentioned as factors constituting differences. Whilst I find "social background" a nice term for avoiding "class", I prefer "class", because it reveals much more clearly one of the main "differences" in western societies, which are structured along class-lines. The concept of "class" reflects the division of our society in terms of the distribution of wealth, power and status. But, on the other hand, gender, race/ethnicity, class, religion, generation, and region are no doubt powerful factors not only in forming an identity on an individual level but also social identities. Thus cultural differences are defined along these lines.

When we speak about differences we could obviously say, that the culture of countries, regions, groups of people and of individuals is different. But we could go into more depth by looking at the question of what "culture" is. There has been, of course, a long on-going discussion about the definition of culture in almost every academic discipline, but I would like to insist that any definition of the term "culture" take into account two elements that are imperative. The first of these elements is the "material" aspect of culture, the way people live, "a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual", to use Raymond Williams words, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general..... the *"the lived experience"*. The second element is the process of giving meaning to one's existence. People have to, in order to survive, not only produce and reproduce their material existence, they also have to make sense of it. This is done by using symbols and sign systems, the most important of which is language. Language as a sign system, is central to what is called a sense-making process. Culture in this respect then is a *"signifying practice"*.

To give an example: the first flowers that announce spring with the bell-shaped blossoms are called in English "snow-drops", in French "nege-perces", and in German "Schneeglockchen". In the different countries you have different images describing the waning of winter and the arrival of spring; in England it is the image of snow melting (dropping water), in France it is the idea of these little flowers piercing the snow, the image of overcoming the harshness of winter, and in Germany people hear bells ringing (Glockchen), which is the idea of rejoicing

at the departure of winter. All of these different images are reflected in the names for that little flower, the precursor of spring.

Normally people tend to speak of cultural differences in terms of different ways of greeting (do you shake hands, or do you bow to each other), or in other behavioural patterns (do you come to a party on time, or half an hour late, do you dress up or casually). These superficial notions of cultural differences are the basis of many concepts of intercultural learning and communication. (German-Japanese courses for mutual, intercultural understanding have reported that Japanese managers always want to shake hands with German managers whereas German managers always bow to the Japanese). To get a deeper insight into the nature of cultural differences I want to introduce you to the "cultural iceberg". (R. Gibson 1995)



It is easy to see that only a minor part of what is culturally different is visible, above the water line: institutions, artifacts, eg. food, clothing, work tools, but also art objects, and behaviour. Much more cannot be observed: meaning, beliefs, attitudes, and underlying them all - the value system. This is the most unconscious, hidden and tacit cultural assumption. On the vertical line you find Geert Hofstede's dimension. Hofstede's field is that of "business studies" and at one time was in charge of undertaking a survey on cultural differences for IBM. They had noted that there had been inefficiency and a loss of productivity at their multi-national enterprises caused by cultural conflict. Hofstede was looking for parameters which allowed him to deal with such diverse cultures as the U.S. and western European

countries, Mediterranean countries and Asian countries. Eventually he found that he could compare different cultures along the lines of the following categories:

- a. power distance and social inequality; i.e. how cultures deal with authority and a hierarchical stratification of society;
- b. individualism/collectivism; i.e. how cultures position an individual in a community / collective;
- c. uncertainty avoidance; how people in different cultures acknowledge the fact of uncertainty and behave accordingly;
- d. masculinity/femininity; i.e. how cultures define what it means to be born as a boy

or

a girl and the attribution of sex roles.

To make Hofstede's categories fruitful for a conceptualisation of intercultural learning I'd like to stress that any such a conceptualisation would have to consider three elements:

- a. the right to live according to one's cultural traditions; this would also mean that a society would have to guarantee the co-existence of various cultures of national, ethnic and social origin.
- b. a participation on an equal basis in political and public affairs, which would involve all members of society having the equal political rights.
- c. an enhancement of life circumstances and life chances of underprivileged minorities. This would involve questions of social justice and possibly a redistribution of social wealth.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, I would propose the following definition:

intercultural learning aims at a person developing an identity in self-confidence, participating in political and public life and having a share of the social wealth without loss of national, cultural and social roots.

When we take a look at Germany we see it is a very ambivalent situation. On the one hand Germany has always been and is even more so today a country of immigration: from the times of the Huegenotts who settled in Prussia and other parts of Germany and contributed extensively to economic progress, because many of them were skilled artisans, to the Poles who worked in the mines and steel mills in the Ruhr area, constituting in some urban areas up to one third of the population, a percentage even the classical countries of immigration like the U.S.A., Canada and Australia seldom reached, to the so-called guest workers of the 50's

and 60's, who were recruited by the German employment office on the assumption that they would be a temporary labour force.

Today more than 70 percent of the former guest worker population has been living in Germany for over ten years. 10 percent of the overall population are of non-German immigrant origin. That makes, in absolute numbers, almost 8 million people. About two million people of non-German origin living in Germany are under 16 years of age. 80,000 babies were born to non-German parents, which is almost 12 % of all births. The Turkish population is, with 5 million people the largest single non-German ethnic group. Germany has *de facto* developed all the features of an immigrant society.

On the other hand Germany has always denied the fact of immigration. It clings to a homogeneous concept of nationality: only those with German parents are German. Ancestry and blood play the decisive role in determining who is German and who is not. In other countries you acquire the right to citizenship through the place of birth, not so in Germany. Even third generation families, their children having been born in Germany in the second generation, remain Turkish, Italian, Polish, in any case, not German. A monocultural general sense of identity is at the root of this concept. It is not the republican, democratic spirit of human rights granted to an individual, but the idea of belonging to a privileged ethnic group, a ***Volk*** which constitutes the community, not the ensemble of individuals on a free and equal basis.

If you are to acquire German citizenship it is, within Germany, of great advantage to you. If you are not a German citizen then you are a second-class citizen. It is not only a question of being able to vote (imagine living in country for 30 years and not being allowed to have a say in how things are run, not even on a city district level), but also, and perhaps more essential, the freedom to move. The EU has now granted the citizens of its member countries the right to move freely across borders. But this does not apply to the 5 million Turkish people living in Germany, because Turkey is not a member state of the EU. So they still have to apply for visas when wishing to go to England, France or Holland. What actually happens is that Germany actively creates a major division within its own population.

The denial of the reality of immigration has severe consequences: the fact of immigration is not reflected in educational policy, school curricula and actual teaching. One example may suffice: history teaching still follows basically a chronological principle. One chapter is the siege of Vienna by the Turks. Prince Eugen, the noble knight, is the hero who rescues Christian civilisation from the barbarian, pagan hordes. Now, in some urban areas we have classes with more than 50% Turkish school kids. Can you imagine what effect such an ethnocentric treatment of history has on them? In such controversial cases I would favour a

multi-perspective approach, i.e. students could present different views of a historical event, e.g. the German opinion on the siege of Vienna and the Turkish view, and thus get a real discussion going.

A multi-perspective, topic-centred approach should be one of the main principles of intercultural learning, then. A second principle should be the integration of different types of school. Here you must keep in mind that the German school system is highly segregated according to ability. We have grammar schools for the most able and the equivalent of secondary modern schools for the less able. This school system also reflects the class aspect, because it is widely known that kids from middle-class families have better opportunities from the start of their school careers than those with a working-class background. Finally, the third principle of intercultural learning is, of course, the integration of German and non-German pupils.

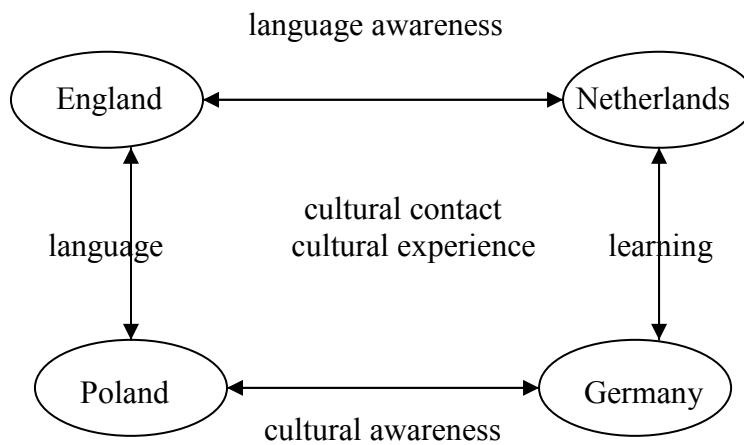
To sum up, I would say: intercultural learning requires,

- * the integration of different types of school (class aspect);
- * the integration of subjects (topic-centred, multi-perspective projects);
- * the integration of German and non-German pupils (ethnic aspect).

A mid-term goal should be establishing intercultural learning as a teaching principle which is applicable to every subject. For the time being it is also worthwhile to establish cultural studies as a subject in its own right with a comparative approach where topics like "fairy tales from all over world", or "how do people build their houses in different parts of the world", or "how do people eat and dress in other countries" could be taught. Let me also point out that topics like these have the additional advantage of allowing a practical, concrete, experience-based and sensitive approach to teaching.

To conclude I would like to outline a new model for training future teachers of English at the University in Bremen. This project is called Intercultural Exchange Network and takes into account the following basic considerations: first of all the programme acknowledges the fact that Western European societies are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, whether they like it or not, and that in almost all the countries concerned there is no adequate political and cultural programme to cope with current problems and the future tasks. This also holds true for the education sector, especially for secondary education and university teaching.

Intercultural Exchange Network
(The better we listen the more we understand ourselves)



The training of future teachers of English as a foreign language at institutions of academic education also needs reconsideration, particularly in light of the development of a concept of cultural studies of English speaking countries and of intercultural learning. The objectives of university teaching are at least twofold:

a. to develop the students' command of the English language to a level of near-native speaker competence,

and

b. to promote knowledge of and develop insights into the cultures of the target language,

the latter being a rather complex undertaking, given the fact, that there exist quite a number of cultures in which English plays a decisive role. In addition, each of these cultures comprises a lot of different fields of knowledge, such as history, political systems, geographical conditions, literature, the media, to name but a few.

Since we are dealing with future teachers, students should also be obliged to take a practical course in methods of foreign language teaching. Traditional university teaching is rather specialised, all endeavours to encourage interdisciplinary approaches notwithstanding. Recent research has revealed that students have great difficulty in fusing the different strands of knowledge, i.e. linking, for example, their knowledge of literature to that of culture, to that of society, to that of linguistics, to that of didactics, and all together to that of practical school teaching. In the case of Germany, there is still a major division between what is taught at university and what is needed at school.

To improve the situation a network of universities engaged in teacher training and schools from different countries has been established, i.e. Gdansk in Poland, Sheffield in England,

Groningen and Leiden in the Netherlands and Bremen, Germany. The idea is that the cooperating universities agree on a certain number of topics, e.g. migration and multi-ethnicity; industrialisation and current economic problems; national identity; city development; culture in the city, to suggest some possible options. All universities offer seminars on the topics agreed upon. Students are encouraged to do research on their own cities on one of the topics given above, i.e. they are requested to make interviews, search for archival material (old pictures, documents), go to museums, draw pictures and present their findings not simply in a seminar paper (although this should be possible also), but in a more exciting way, e.g. prepare a small exhibition, a slide show with music and words, a newspaper, a guide to the city, a video, a radio play and so on. The common language is English. At the end of the term or during term holidays the network organises a meeting (rotating to different countries from term to term). The participants can then exchange and discuss their research findings in person.

These meetings are essential, because they allow what I like to term "cultural contact". One of the main aims of intercultural learning is to deepen the insight not only into the foreign culture but also into one's own, to reevaluate value-standards and cultural patterns, to have direct contact with ethnic and cultural "otherness".

As a next step, after the meetings, students are encouraged to take all the material collected and discussed at these meetings and prepare their practical courses with it, i.e. try it out at school, the big advantage being that all the material is authentic, something which is still a rarity at school.

So by and large, I hope that the network will make university teaching and English language learning at schools more lively by shifting part of the responsibility to the students themselves, (self-determined learning), that it will combine various fields of teacher training and integrate university teaching and practical courses, but above all I hope to establish a network which fosters authentic communication and cultural contact between European youth, thus enhancing the development of a European identity from the bottom up.

Language learning has its components language awareness and authentic communication, but more importantly it involves cultural awareness through cultural contact and cultural experience. What I have attempted to convey here is maybe best summed up by the sentence: the better we listen to them the more we understand ourselves.

References:

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