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## Cross-cultural learning and managing diversity

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### Political education

It is an important and necessary step to bring citizenship education in Germany (the German term is *Politische Bildung*, i.e. political education) into the context of the multicultural society and globalisation.

From the subject's point of view it is important to achieve all the competences and skills which are needed to move in a complex environment, to cope with unexpected situations, to have access to any institution, to cooperate successfully with people (from) abroad, and so on. This is to extend one's own range of acting: political education is, on this understanding, the process by which an individual actor gains more control over his or her life, for example by participation.

For any democratic system (including the EU) it is crucial to receive support from as many groups as possible, including those who speak languages or perform traditions which differ from those of the mainstream. Minority rights have to be guaranteed in order to make sure that those minorities can express their demands. The more the political system can respond to these, the more legitimisation it gains (political education as a process which is organised by the political system in order to expand and increase its legitimacy).

Of course, there are values and norms such as the dignity of man, liberty and equality, even fundamental rights which build the framework for any individual and state (political education as an indispensable dialogue about human rights and how to realise them). If, to quote a campaign of youth associations in Germany a few years ago, people are '*different, but equal*', we have to ask: different in what sense, under which aspect? All of us would agree on a programme which promises to enable young people to cope with 'differences', particularly with cultural differences.

### Culture

There are thousands of situations like the following: some people joined their hands, others shook hands, some were wearing turbans or veils, others hats, some refrained from eating beef or pork or meat at all, some dictated to their staff what do, others discussed the problem extensively ... or ... If we are part of these situations, whether as actor or as observer, we might deem these practices to be 'strange'. Because we are not familiar with them, does this mean that the others are strange?

No, they are not. Usually the other people involved in this behaviour are not strange: we know or suppose that they behave in that way because it is an aspect of their culture. We explain the situation in terms of culture, and thus it has lost its strangeness. We do not blame or despise the other persons, though they behave in a – from our point of view – unexpected, different way; they are not crazy, or sick, or provocative – it is not a 'fault', it is their culture which explains their behaviour.

The same is true for attitudes, even values and norms, the system of perceiving the world, *Weltanschauung* and beliefs. Some keywords show the variety of orientations: authority,

paradise, happiness, fate, self-realisation, success, fun. Following Hofstede (1993), we can distinguish cultures of individualism and collectivism, masculinity or collectivism, with different grades of uncertainty avoidance etc.

‘Culture’ has an explanatory power by which, in any ‘critical situation’, tension, rejection and hostility can be reduced or avoided. Culture is something which can release inter-individual communication from any bad feelings, as it is not because of ‘him/her’ or me that we do not come together, but because of the fact that we have different cultures. Frequently culture is confused, however, with nationality or ethnicity.

As soon as we know more about the cultural differences, it seems to be possible to avoid ‘critical incidents’ – it is only necessary to have intercultural training, to learn the cultural standards, to anticipate which ‘must’s and ‘do not’s’ are crucial, and even more importantly, to learn which are the standards my partners (!) follow. Thus well-trained people can interact successfully with culturally different people, for example in making good business abroad. This is the message professional trainers would like to sell us. Cultural diversity can be managed comfortably, we believe.

### **Multiculturalism**

The cultural approach is largely a positive one. Right wing or neo-Nazi protagonists rarely argue in terms of culture, which appears to be a modern or even post-modern term and not so easily handled as ‘peoples’ or ‘races’. You cannot even be sure about whether culture and nation or nation state is the same. Possibly this has to do with a deeply anchored ‘gourmet’-multiculturalism; even nationalists have to admit that pizza, kebab, Peking duck and sushi do enrich their kitchens. There are thousands of well organised events, formerly called Foreigners’ Day and more recently Day of the Foreign Co-citizen (In Germany ‘foreigner’ is the term for all people who do not have German citizenship). Beside food and beverages, people can enjoy folk dances and music as part of different cultures.

In schools the multicultural classroom cannot be ignored any more. Mostly curricula and teachers approach this positively and give the children opportunities to present their traditional feasts, such as Bayram and Ramadan. Altogether, a culture of recognition has been established: people know and accept that there are a remarkable number of citizens who live in different traditions. But this type of multiculturalism is selective and superficial. Culture is reduced to folklore, and children are recognised only as representatives of their culture.

However, as soon as values, norms and human rights are involved, the acceptance of cultural variety does not work. There cannot be any cultural relativism with regard to physical violence, psychological oppression or inequality. The ‘cultural option’ is also problematic when the ‘difference’ is a too big a challenge for the mainstream. In many German states it is not permitted in public schools that girls wear a veil –whether it is a religious, political or just a private symbol. The political class acts as if the population has to be prevented from experiencing and accepting too much difference.

### **Culturalism**

The culturalist approach has, no doubt, some advantages. The disadvantages, however, outweigh them. There are two major problems:

- the homogeneity assumption, and
- the collective determination.

Altogether it is the problem of reification which has to be addressed.

The explanatory power of ‘culture’ disappears as soon as individuals can behave in this or that way – free to decide within a wide range of options according to particular interests and objectives, including the option to leave the particular ‘cultural setting’ (for example, by migration to another place). For modern, pluralist societies it is no longer possible to identify a single culture – be it within societal or territorial borders. If you do so, it remains a brief, abstract display of fundamental values like individualism, liberty, achievement, social responsibility...which is far from being particular and applicable to a concrete situation.

Recently, Huntington (1996) has constructed huge ‘cultures’ or civilisations which interact and even compete and fight with each other. It is arguable that global politics can be described and predicted in those terms. For the daily interaction of people this scheme has no explanatory power at all. Cultures cannot act: it is an individual or a group of individuals which acts. In a society like Germany the attitudes and values/norms which underpin individual behaviour are so differentiated that they cannot be subsumed to one denominator.

Whenever identity policy is about to be established, only culture in the sense of arts and folklore and tradition can be referred to; not the values and norms which rule individual behaviour (cf. Berg, 2001). ‘Culture’ is a term which is not really useful as it is too compact, a catch-all word. On the other hand, people do not act just as they want, in an unstructured way, unpredictably.

Instead of culture we prefer the concept of rules. People follow rules, according to specific settings and situations related to their position. Rules are more than observable behaviour: rules can be offended against – but everybody (at least those who share the rule) knows that it is an offence. Rules are valid even counterfactually. And rules can change and can be changed.

## **Rules**

In order to show the nature of rules and their range, four examples from Germany are given:

### *Time*

If you have a formal appointment, you are expected to be at the place on time, i.e. a few minutes earlier. If you have a private invitation, you should not arrive in time, but a couple of minutes later.

### *Decision-making*

Parents either accept proposals made by their children or argue against them. A longer process of bargaining can take place, during which all stakeholders have to present good arguments. Parents might forbid or refuse bargaining if the discussion does not lead to an agreement; in this case the parents can decide in terms of a verdict – but it has to remain an exception.

### *Money*

In the middle and upper class you can talk about prices and tax-saving strategies, but not about salaries and income. You do not lend money to your siblings, friends, neighbours or colleagues. If you do lend, you might be considered naive or extremely 'social'.

### *Justice*

You have to work hard and endeavour constantly to achieve your goals. But don't worry, if you fail, it is bad luck, once there will be a type of compensation. Those who are just lucky or pretend to be so (and do not merit it) cannot become happy.

Rules concern different aspects of human life: how to perceive, how to behave, how to judge things. These rules are wide spread in Germany, but far from being generally valid.

### **Changing rules**

Increasingly people have started to propagate the idea of a 'culture of an enterprise' or of a university. It leads from the fact that institutions constitute a set of rules. Rules can be changed, and do change, but the *prima vista* gives structure and orientation. Some rules are clearly formulated (contract, law) and legitimate negative sanctions. Others are informal, representing more the 'spirit' of that body.

Currently we can observe a process to change the rules. Educational institutions, most prominently the universities, are challenged by powerful attempts to impose economic rules on them, in particular the rules of the market economy. One subsystem claims to be the model for another one. We also witness political decisions which aim to change the rules of social security. Recent legislation in Germany, copying the British model, attempts to make clear that unemployed people are not entitled to decent allowances, but can only apply for basic support, only after having exhausted all their own resources and proved they have plenty of initiative and utmost flexibility.

These remarks seem to be far from the topic of intercultural learning. What is the argument? There are three arguments to be learned:

- culture gives a static view, rules emphasise change
- rules are part of a highly sophisticated (formal or informal) system
- there are actors, prominently economic and political ones, who exercise power in order to change rules or transfer/interfere with 'traditional' rules.

And there is a rich corpus of examples which show what will happen if different rules are in conflict.

### **Diversity**

In modern societies there are thousands of rules which might differ. Culture selects just one, which relates to traditions, ethnic categories or the fact of immigration. The truth, however, is, that we experience an overwhelming variety of rules, a complexity, a diversity – not only the traditional 'cultural differences' (related to traditions, ethnic origin, the distinction between immigrants and 'host' society).

When Turkish families or African asylum seekers encounter German 'mainstream' people is an example of the subclass of rule divergence, and probably not the most important one.

Maybe the ‘cultural difference’ between these immigrants and their target society is minor compared with others. Can one imagine a greater difference between the rules an entrepreneur has to follow and the rules an employee wants to be realised? Is there any community between an old member of the trade unions in the city of Dortmund and a young neo-Nazi in the rural areas of Brandenburg?

Modern management has already developed a new concept which replaces the intercultural approach. Managing diversity is a very systematic and pragmatic strategy to accept and benefit from the fact that ‘human resources’ – employees (and also customers: ethnomarketing) – do have different capacities, attitudes and approaches which can be utilised in order to find better solutions. Currently still largely restricted to creative tasks like problem solving or project development, the different resources of male and female staff, employees from different countries of origin, people with different styles of life, sexual orientations, different age groups etc. might be combined and brought together. The anti-discrimination legislation implemented by the EU is a strong normative pressure which can no longer be neglected. It does not refer to ‘culture’ in only the traditional sense: why not use it in a productive, creative way?

### Rule bargaining

Citizenship education is the educational field which can provide the new generation with the competences to cope with diversity, to learn how to communicate and cooperate in a complex setting which entails actors who follow different rules.

In a given society individuals and groups might cope with this situation by strategies of avoidance, tolerance or power/dominance. In each case the parties need not, or do not want to, change themselves. Of course, there are many rules which can be tolerated by others, as they are not touched by them. This is true for the private sphere (kitchen, music, education etc.) as long as public interest or basic values are not involved. It is ‘nice’ to have lessons in schools which give children the opportunity to illustrate how their families celebrates religious feasts (or not), but it is crucial for daily life and cooperation to find a way of dealing with different ‘tastes’ and norms when a common meal is to be prepared, or the techniques of slaughtering offend religious or ethnic norms.

In everyday life people do (and must) interact, though they follow different rules: they ‘bargain’ and develop a *modus vivendi*, agree on new rules. In pluralistic, open, post-modern societies the rules might be individualised, but most are due to ‘subcultures’ related to age, gender, lifestyle, social shift, profession, income etc, as well as ethnicity or country of origin.

Citizenship education, under these auspices, is a planned and systematic endeavour to facilitate, exercise and strengthen ‘meta-’rules, which make us capable of coping with diversity. Hence, citizenship education has a double function for teaching diversity:

- to make people familiar with the fact that diversity exists and can be appreciated
- to enable people to ‘learn diversity’, i.e. cope with it, find a *modus vivendi* and create new rules fairly.

## Practice

What is the impact of these reflections on educational practice? Keywords might be: multi-perspective, comparison, conflict and individuality.

### *Multi-perspective*

- Historical facts like the foundation of the German Empire 1870/71 used to be presented in our schools from a national perspective only. What is the view in French textbooks for instance?
- Political processes like EU-enlargement are described on behalf of the interests of old member states. What is the impact on the new members?
- Celebrating the 200th anniversary of Schiller's death, students can wonder why this German poet is part of the classical heritage, but was (partly) highlighted by Nazis and in the GDR as well.

### *Comparison*

- Which rituals which determine the end of childhood can be identified all over the world? What are the similarities of *Bar Mitzvah*, Christian confirmation and 'Jugendweihe'?

### *Conflict of interests*

- If facilities for youth must be open to everybody, how can we find a fair arrangement which give girls, young Kurds, techno-fans and chess-players access? In most cases the best solution will be to launch a fair and non-violent debate and deliberation until new rules can be created. Any solution dictated by one interest group, be it the mainstream or a minority, will be sub-optimal. The criteria are satisfaction and equity.

### *Individuality*

- There are good reasons for structures and rules in the classroom in order to enhance the learning process. But to view the class-room as a learning opportunity for each child includes the openness for individual learning, in terms of time for instance, but also with regard to the instruments/media. One child prefers to work with visual material, deductive and rapidly, another one needs more time and an inductive approach with oral guidance... What an important experience it is for young people to accept different ways and be accepted individually. What an extraordinary skill teachers must have to facilitate learning processes by managing diversity.

## Synergy

Though it is strenuous to learn diversity, it is fascinating and very reasonable: if other people are different, I am different, too. If diversity is a problem, I myself am part of it.

Beyond these practical and normative arguments there is another one, yet to be experienced and proved. There is some evidence that different approaches to one problem, differing rules about how to manage a situation, settings of diversity can lead to better solutions in a technical sense. While Management Schools claim the efficiency of an organisation (including all types of enterprises) is due to its particular 'culture', and emphasise a sort of corporate identity, the opposite is true: the more diversity an

organisation is practicing, the more diversity it can cope with. To give an example: somehow related to traditions and 'cultures', but widely due to professional and personal characters and also gender, people approach a task in different ways: some prefer structures, time schedules, and particular, clear output while others prefer communication, creativity and multi-faceted results. To combine output orientation and process-orientation appears to be the best way, at least in different stages of the work. Hence, to manage diversity is more than a societal challenge (if the society is committed to fairness and equity), it also improves cooperation in terms of satisfaction and outcome.

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