



## 3. An educational framework for intercultural learning?

### 3.1 General considerations

One of the challenges associated with intercultural learning is that there is no clearly defined educational discipline known as “intercultural learning”. This is exciting, because it means that we all have to struggle to make sense of it.

Nevertheless, if we adapt or create methods, we will do it in an educational framework, maybe created and influenced by ourselves, the circumstances, the trainers team, the participants. It can be useful to know what does (and does not) serve the objectives of intercultural learning. Here we suggest some basic principles of importance. They are based on and closely linked to the theories and concepts of intercultural learning presented above. They will be even more evident when we bear in mind in which situations this learning process happens – nowadays and for young people.

The following lines of thoughts are intended to raise awareness, ask questions and give pointers to some relevant educational approaches...

#### Confidence and Respect

Building up confidence is a cornerstone of intercultural learning in order to achieve the openness necessary for a mutual process. It is a prerequisite that we feel comfortable to share different viewpoints, perceptions and feelings, to arrive at acceptance and understanding. It requires a lot of patience and sensitivity in order to create such a learning atmosphere which enables us to listen to each other as equals, to empower each individual's self-confidence. This means that we need to give space to everybody's expression; to value all experiences, talents and contributions; our various needs and expectations. When the big part of what we might share is about values, norms and strong basic assumptions, we will need a lot of confidence in the ones we share with. Mutual trust goes hand in hand with mutual respect, honesty in our sharing.

#### Experiencing Identity

The departure point of Intercultural Learning is our own culture, which means, our own background and experience. It is in our roots where we encounter the obstacles and chances of this learning process. We have all a personal reality which has shaped us, and we will

continue to live there, enriched with new knowledge and experience. That means, in intercultural learning processes, we have to deal constantly with where we come from, what we have lived and encountered. Trying to understand ourselves, our own identity, is a prerequisite to encounter others. We might change through the encounter, but not necessarily the reality around us. This is challenging. Therefore, as part of the process, we have as well to deal with the responsibility, potential and limits of being multipliers of new knowledge.

#### Constructed Realities

Nothing is absolute. There are many ways to read and discern reality. The thesis, that everyone constructs their own worlds, that every reality is its own construction, is one main factor in intercultural learning processes. The variety of different dimensions in many theories which describe cultural difference (see: Hofstede and Hall & Hall) show how differently we can perceive reality, even such basic dimensions as time and space. But still, we all live in one world and that affects our lives. Consequently, the learning process should be accompanied by some efforts: to respect personal freedom and decision, to accept other views equally and seek the reconciliation of different viewpoints, and to be conscious of our personal responsibility. But the difference will and shall persist as constructive. That's why in the final stage of Bennett's model to develop intercultural sensitivity we are invited “to operate within different worldviews”.

#### In Dialogue with the Other

Intercultural learning places “the other” at the heart of understanding. It starts through dialogue, but yet is a step further. It is challenging to perceive myself and the other as being different, and to comprehend that this difference contributes to what and how I am. Our different beings complement each other. In this understanding, the other becomes indispensable for a new discovery of the self. This experience challenges us, it creates something new, and requires creativity for new solutions. The process towards such an intercultural sensitivity implies – understood as a process towards the other – to touch and change our





very self. Intercultural learning opens up the chance to identify with the perspective of the other, the respectful experience of attempting to “walk in each others’ shoes” without pretending to live what the other lives. It can enable us to experience and learn real solidarity, believing in the strength of co-operation. Intercultural learning in this context is as well a way to discover our own capacity for action.

### Questions and Change

The experience of intercultural learning is one of constant change (as the world is), it is above all process-oriented. Discussing culture, the tension between stagnation and change, the longing for security and balance appear constantly. We have open questions and will raise new ones. Therefore, we need to accept that there is not always an answer, but remain in constant search, accepting and welcoming change. Reflecting on it, we will need the capacity to question ourselves. We do not always know where this integration leads us. Curiosity is important, new perceptions are desired. And we have to be aware that the construction of something new implies possibly the break down of the old – such as ideas, beliefs, traditions.... No learning process is free of ruptures and farewells. As trainers, we need to provide good and sensitive accompaniment in it.

### Comprehensive Involvement

Intercultural learning is an experience which involves all senses and levels of learning, knowledge, emotions, behaviour in an intensive way. It evokes a lot of feelings; it provokes gaps between them and maybe our “reason”, what we knew or get to know. The comprehension of the complexity of this process and all its implications demand a lot from us. Language as element of culture is a central aspect in intercultural communication, and at the same time limited, often a source of misunderstanding. It must thereby not be used as a means of dominance – especially considering different language skills – but can be one tool of communication. All other signs – like body language – have to be equally respected. Since we are fully involved in this kind of learning, we should allow ourselves to be completely part of the processes happening.

### The Potential of Conflict

If we see the variety of perceptions different cultures have of time, space, social and personal

relations... it appears evident that conflict is at the heart of intercultural learning and needs to be explored and expressed. At the same time, these models invite us to discuss the differences without labelling it. Consequently, we can try to find the constructive elements and chances of conflict. We need to develop conflict management skills, while considering the complexity when dealing with the notion of culture. The various expressions of identity, the effort to valorise differences are both challenging. Intercultural learning implies a search, means new insecurities, and this carries a natural conflictive potential. This can be valued as part of the process. Diversity can be experienced as helpful and enriching, towards new forms and new solutions. The variety of competencies is a positive and indispensable contribution towards the whole. Not every conflict has necessarily a solution, but it certainly needs to be expressed.

### Under the surface

Intercultural learning aims at very deep processes and changes of attitudes and behaviours. It means to deal a good part with the invisible forces and elements of our culture, of our inner self (see: Iceberg Model), many things beneath the “water surface” are unconscious and cannot be expressed clearly. This discovery implies therefore personally and in the encounter some risks, it implies tensions with which we have to deal. It is obviously not easy to accompany people in this process. On the one hand, we need the courage to go further, to challenge ourselves and others. On the other hand, we have to be very careful and respectful to peoples’ needs and the limits of these processes. It is not always easy to keep both in mind.

### A complex matter in a complex world

The theoretical models show already the complexity of intercultural learning, the difficulty to systematise it. If we set this in the complex situation of today’s society, it becomes clear that we need very careful and comprehensive approaches allowing a maximum of discernment. Even culture goes beyond national borders and knows many forms and overlapping. Many perspectives have to be met, tensions have to be considered: a look at the past, present and future, comparing the sometimes contradictory needs of individual and society.



Fragmented experiences have to be put together. It is a challenge to any educational approach not to simplify the variety of reasons and implications present, the different values emphasised, the different realities and histories lived. Intercultural learning approaches need to respect these diverse experiences, interpretations and knowledge and – consequently – consider them in the language and terminology used and the choice of different methodologies.

## 3.2 Method selection, creation and adaptation

Every situation is different. You may be preparing a training course, an exchange, a workcamp or a simple workshop. Read the methods presented in the publication in this perspective and – according to the particular needs of your group – select and adapt them. Create something new out of it. The methods presented here are not written on tablets of stone, nor are they masterpieces created by geniuses. They are an offer, a collection of useful experiences. When using them, you do not need to respect anything apart from YOUR own intercultural learning situation, the participants involved and their reality, their requirements. The following questions – considered with care – may help facilitate your work in putting together a particular programme element. The list of questions is not closed – you may well find others more important.

### a. Aims and objectives

What actually do we want to reach with this particular method, in this particular moment of the programme? Did we define our objectives clearly and is this method suitable? Is this method in line with reaching the overall aims of our activity? Will this method be effective in helping us to advance? Does this method fit with the principles of our defined methodology? Is this method appropriate in the present dynamic of this particular intercultural learning situation? Are all requirements to use this method (e. g. group or learning atmosphere, relations, knowledge, information, experiences...) given by previous processes? What is the concrete subject / theme we are talking about? Which different aspects (and conflicts) can come up using this method, and

how far can we preview (deal with) them? Is the method able to meet the complexity and linkages of different aspects? How can the method contribute to open new perspectives and perceptions?

### b. Target group

For and with whom do we develop and use this method? What is the precondition of the group and the individuals in the group? Which consequences could the method have for their interactions, mutual perceptions and relations? Does the method meet the expectations of the group (individuals)? How can we arouse their interest? What will they need (individually and as group) and contribute in this particular moment of the learning situation? Does the method give sufficient space for it? Is the method contributing to release their potential? Does the method allow enough individual expression? How can the method work out the similarities and diversities of the group? Does the group have any particular requirements needing our attention (age, gender, language skills, (dis)abilities...) and how can the method take them up in a positive way? Has the group or some individuals within it shown specific resistance or sensitivities towards the subject (e.g. minorities, gender, religion...), or extreme differences (of experience, age...) which could impact on the dynamic? Where does the group at in terms of intercultural learning process? Is the method suitable for the group size?

### c. Environment, space and time

What is the (cultural, social, political, personal...) environment in which we use this method? Which impact does the method have on this environment, and the environment on the method? Which elements (experiences) do the individual group members bring in this regard? Which environment (elements, patterns) is dominating in the group and why? Is the group atmosphere and level of communication suitable for the method? Does the context of this particular intercultural learning experience especially promote or hinder certain elements? How is the common (and individual) perception of space, is the “common territory” of the group large enough for using the method? Does the method contribute to a positive environment (to stretch everybody’s comfort zones)? Which space does the method have in the activity (consider what comes



before and after)? Did we allocate enough time to the method and its proper evaluation? Does it fit within the timing of our programme? How does the method deal with the (different) time perception of participants?

#### **d. Resources / Framework**

How does the method match with the resources we have at our disposal (time, room, persons, materials, media...)? Is the method using them efficiently? What organisational aspects do we need to take into account? Do we need to simplify? How can we share the responsibilities to run the method? To what extent do we have the relevant skills to deal with the upcoming situation? In which (institutional, organisational...) frame will the method be used? Which impacts do we have to consider or foresee (e. g. organisational culture or preferences, institutional aims...)? Which outside actors might interfere with which interests (e.g. institutional partners, other people in the building...)?

#### **e. Previous evaluation**

Did we use this (or a similar) method before? What did we notice or learn from the experience? Are there any other experiences where we learnt about the use of methods? What can they tell us now? Are the method and its impact to be evaluated, and how can the achievement of our objectives be measured? How can we secure its results for what comes next? (report...)? Which elements do

we integrate in our method as part of the evaluation of our activity so far?

#### **f. Transfer**

To what extent is our method based on (or related to) the experience of every participant and on the learning experiences made so far? Is the method useful for the reality of the participants or in which regard might it need adaptation? Is the method oriented towards transfer/integration into the daily life of the participants? How will we provide a space for participants to integrate what they have learned into their own realities? Can a discussion or dynamic after the method help the transfer? Which elements might facilitate a good follow-up by participants? How can elements be taken up later in the process?

#### **g. The role of the facilitators or trainers**

A facilitator provides a process which will help the group to discuss their own content in the most satisfactory and productive way possible. This will mean trying to find answers to the questions raised in the sections above and thinking about how we plan to organise things. What do we think our role should be with this group, for this method? Have we tried to “play a film in our heads” about how everything should work? Did we consider our personal disposition and how it could impact on the running of the method? How are we prepared to react to outcomes which are not what we expected?