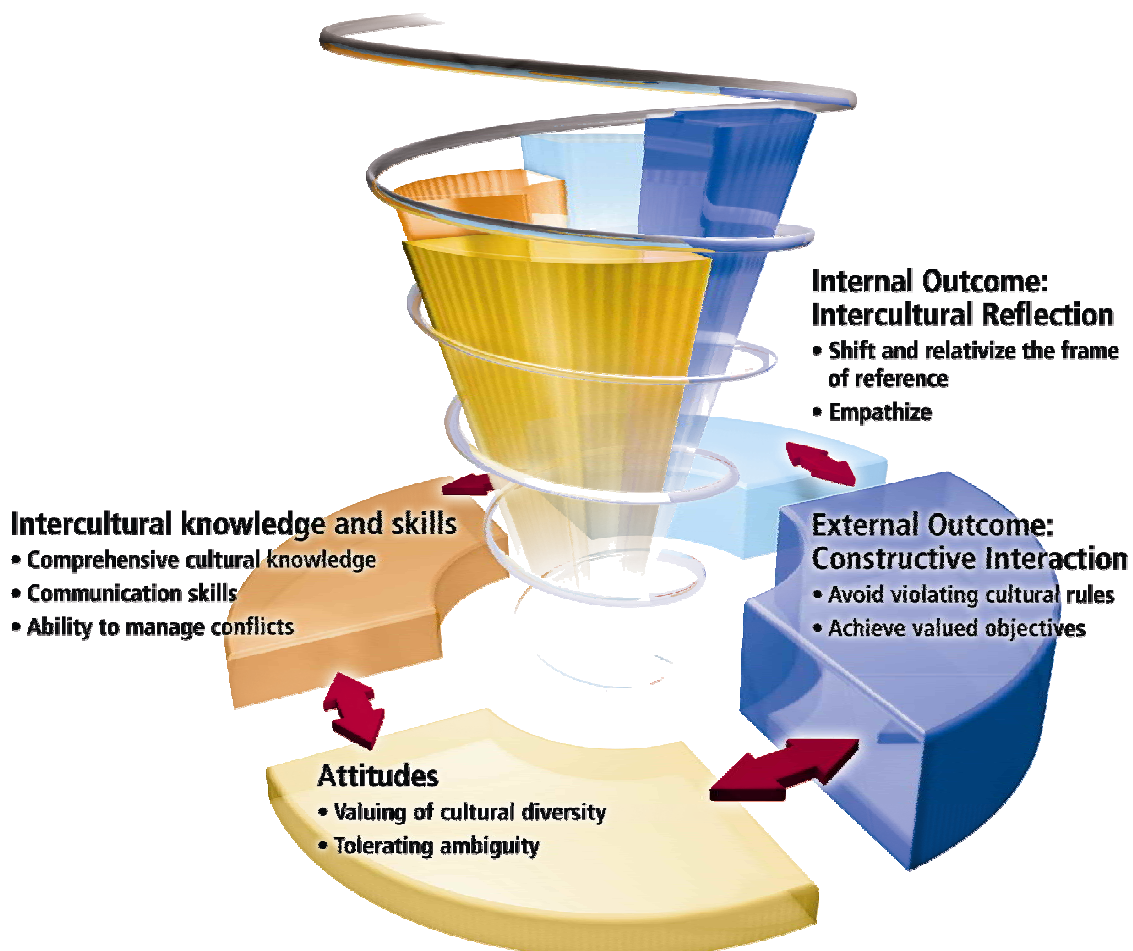


Intercultural Competence – The key competence in the 21st century?

Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo



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Intercultural Competence – The key competence in the 21st century?

The Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Fondazione Cariplo share the objectives to promote tolerance, integration and cultural dialogue both within Europe and with other non-European partners. One recurring topic for both foundations has been the notion of "intercultural competence" for ensuring the capabilities of individual persons to deal with growing heterogeneity in a globalized world.

Against this background both foundations would like to present the following theses on intercultural competence for discussion. In particular it is hoped that the theses are useful within the context of the Interculture project that Fondazione Cariplo is carrying out in the Lombardy region in 2008 and 2009.

The theses are based on a policy paper that the Bertelsmann Stiftung published 2006 in Germany together with the US-based expert Dr. Darla Deardorff, who presented a definition of intercultural competence upon which leading US intercultural experts have reached consensus¹. The policy paper resulting from those efforts was presented and discussed for the first time at an interdisciplinary workshop held in early 2006 in Gütersloh. Other workshops have followed in the meantime and helped to shape and advance the theses. The editors of this paper are deeply indebted to all specialists who were involved in this exchange of ideas and provided us with their expertise².

The theses presented here, however, represent the view of the foundations formed after taking account of the diverse inputs and insights of the experts consulted. As the authors and editors the foundations take sole responsibility for any inconsistencies or mistakes throughout this paper. The theses are conceived as presenting a widespread understanding of intercultural competence and a call for further discussion on the subject, including additional methodological project work. Ultimately, the theses may help to address the challenge of creating benchmark educational programs to promote intercultural competence at school level.

Thesis 1: Dealing constructively with cultural diversity is of growing importance

In Europe, as in other regions of the world, awareness is increasing of the potential for conflict – as well as the opportunities for benefit – inherent in cultural diversity as experienced both in society as a whole and in professional and private settings. Given the process of pluralization that has resulted from internationalization, the ethnic, religious and cultural heterogeneity of our societies will

¹ Deardorff, D. K. (2006): The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at institutions of higher education in the United States. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 10 No. 3: 241-266.

² The editors would like to acknowledge the valuable input in particular by Dr. Fritz Audebert (Passau), Dr. Darla Deardorff (North Carolina), Prof. Dr. Peter Franklin (Constance), Dr. Cornelius Görres (Munich), Prof. Dr. Jürgen Henze (Berlin), Prof. Dr. Rainer Kokemohr (Hamburg), Dr. Wolfgang Nieke (Rostock), Prof. Milena Santerini (Italy), Dr. Michael Schönhuth (Trier), Dr. Alexander Scheitza (Saarbruecken), Prof. Dr. Juergen Straub (Bochum), Dr. Gottfried Wagner (Amsterdam), Prof. Dr. Doris Weidemann (Zwickau), and Ina Zukrigl-Schief (Berlin).

increase, as will contacts between people of differing cultural values and norms. Thus, in the coming years, the ability to deal constructively on an interpersonal level with cultural diversity and a multitude of attitudes, values, norms, belief systems and ways of life will not only remain a key qualification required of business executives working in international settings; it will also be required generally of each individual as a key factor for contributing to social cohesion and reducing exclusion so that cultural diversity can be experienced positively. Of course, this capacity cannot avoid and eliminate conflicts between individuals and groups completely but (when they are ‘unavoidable’) allows them to be perceived and coped with sensitively. The term “intercultural competence” emerged long ago at the onset of these processes, a concept whose meaning and implications have undergone continual elaboration and refinement as a result of scientific investigation and practical experience.

Thesis 2: A preliminary definition of intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations; it is supported by specific attitudes and affective features, (inter)cultural knowledge, skills and reflection.

This perception is abstract and general. As with similar definitions, it covers all fields of action in professional praxis (in international management, intercultural counseling or intercultural education in school, for example) and more private contexts. In particular it corresponds with the prevalent definitions of intercultural competence in western research which in general refer to intercultural competence as consisting of a combination of affective, behavioural and cognitive factors³. This widespread definition should serve as a useful basis for the following theses as well as a pragmatic starting point for further theoretical analyses, empirical research projects and for practical work in different action fields.

Thesis 3: No intercultural competence without a sociopolitical framework

Intercultural competence as defined here refers to the interaction of individuals, and not systems such as societies or organizations. Yet every interpersonal encounter takes place within a framework that is defined by the predispositions, goals and rules (especially social norms) present in the given system. If the system framework includes hierarchical relationships, for example, or demands assimilation in accordance with certain preconceptions of identity, or gives rise to conflicts relating to asymmetric distribution of resources or recognition, then even the interaction of interculturally competent actors can be quite difficult; it can even degenerate into expressions of collective

³ Cf. the definition by Darla Deardorff upon which leading US intercultural experts have reached consensus in: Deardorff, D. K. (2006): The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at institutions of higher education in the United States. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 10 No. 3: 241-266; Straub, J. A. Weidemann and D. Weidemann (eds.) (2007) *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz: Grundbegriffe, Theo-rien, Anwendungsfelder*. Stuttgart: Metzler; H. Spencer-Oatey and P. Franklin: *Intercultural interaction. A multidisciplinary approach to intercultural communication*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan (2009).

violence. In a culturally diverse or even conflict-ridden environment, influencing this framework is an issue for e.g. school authorities, corporate management (in a business setting) or is a general sociopolitical responsibility (in politics); in no way, however, is it the focus object of intercultural competencies at inter-personal level.

Yet it must be noted that sociopolitical policies give rise to a framework conducive to intercultural competent behavior when they are inclusive for all members of society and do not promulgate the idea of a culturally homogenous, thus exclusive group. Ultimately, this framework exists when those actors involved in intercultural situations meet – or can meet – on terms of equality.

For example at school level recognizing diversity as assets that enrich society and striving to provide students with equal learning opportunities are important building blocks for a promising framework. As the Carl Bertelsmann Prize 2008 revealed other policy building blocks to promote integration are advanced language proficiency, broad community partnerships to ensure that students and their families receive the support they need to become equal members of society, parental support in order to guide parents to encourage their children to learn and do well in school, monitoring and assessment, and finally qualifying teaching staff for the intercultural settings they are dealing with⁴.

Thesis 4: Intercultural competence is based on a process-oriented definition of culture

In particular, the lively discussion about what defines intercultural competence has resulted from changing notions of culture and the difficulties these changes pose. Intercultural competence refers to the real world in which we live and act, the world we have created together and continue to re-create daily. For the given purpose of the theses it is reasonable to employ the “expanded” idea of culture that became prevalent in the 1970s and according to which culture must be understood within the overall context of human interaction. Scholars and writers have frequently conceived of culture either as an iceberg⁵ or as an onion⁶. What both metaphors share is that culture consists of both a visible and experienceable part and invisible, but nevertheless also essential parts. Like an onion culture may include an outer layer of what people primarily associate with culture: the visible reality of behavior, clothes, food, language, housing, etc. (explicit culture) as well as hidden layers containing the norms and values a society holds (normative layer) and deeper layers of basic assumptions and world views (implicit culture). By focusing on what was assumed to be an integrated, almost static whole of locality, group and culture, initially the expanded idea remained

⁴ Cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) (2008): *Immigrant Students Can Succeed – Lessons from around the Globe*. Bertelsmann: Gütersloh.

⁵ For example French, W. L. and C. H. Bell, (1979). *Organization Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, who attribute it to a presentation given by Stanley N. Herman in 1970. See also: Ruhly, Sharon (1976). *Orientations to Intercultural Communication*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Science Research Associates; Weaver, G. and P. Uncapher (1981). *The Nigerian experience: Overseas living and value change*. Paper presented at the Seventh Annual SIETAR Conference, Vancouver, B.C., Canada; and Schein, Edgar (1985, 2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Sackmann, Sonja (2002): *Unternehmenskultur: Erkennen, Entwickeln, Verändern*. Neuwied: Luchterhand.

⁶ For example: Hofstede, Geert (1980, 2001). *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage; Trompenaars, Fons and Hampden-Turner, Charles (2002): *Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, London.

unexamined: culture was considered (and is still considered by many) to be the way of life of a certain group of people in a specific setting, people who – because of their culture – consider themselves members of the same group and who – because of their culture – are different from other groups in other localities. This notion is often depicted as a global map with different discrete cultural groups, or as a mosaic, whose pieces are distinct individual cultures.

Since Ulf Hannerz⁷ (and others) formulated the ideas of “culture as flux” and the idea that cultures are open, dynamic and constantly changing ‘entities’ or “practices”, many leading figures in social theory and cultural studies in the 1990s increasingly relinquished the viewpoint that culture can be understood as a closed and static, island-like entity. In addition internationalization and globalization processes have shown the previous notion – that locality, group and culture exist as one unit – to be false or oversimplifying. Globalized markets for goods and services, global media structures and migrant flows have led to an exponential increase in the processes of cultural exchange. In the course of such contacts, numerous traditional forms of life have disappeared. Local cultures are changing and are combining with others in new and unusual ways. The boundaries between what is known and what is foreign are becoming increasingly blurred. Many societies around the globe have become culturally heterogeneous. What once was foreign can now be found next door. Members of what once were largely homogeneous groups live with immigrants and emigrants, with their languages, religions, attitudes – all of which have become part of local communities across the globe. At the same time geographical location has become less of a determinant of cultural affiliation.

The changed, process-oriented conception of culture as a dynamic entity therefore tries to accommodate the contradictions, the intermixing and the new diversity, which are based more on relationships than autonomy. Culture in this sense is perceived not as a static, hermetically sealed system, but as a current of ever changing meanings. Newly advanced by academia, this procedural understanding of culture as a dynamic flow and ongoing process of negotiation between norms, values and lifestyles only underlines the need for a conceptualization of intercultural competence which is in its turn able to take account of the changing nature of culture and the interactions it influences. Some existing models of intercultural competence, in fact, underscore the importance of a process-orientation, including a recent grounded-theory study involving leading intercultural scholars in the US⁸.

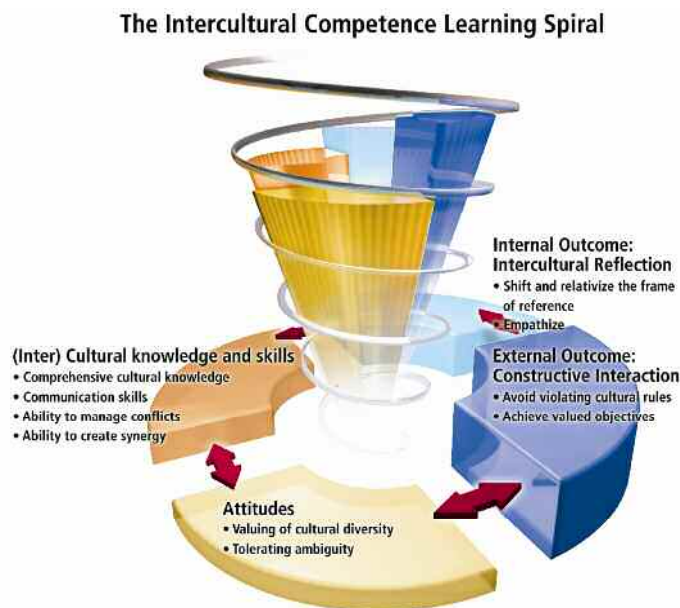
Thesis 5: Intercultural competence develops dynamically in different domains

Intercultural competence is neither a static state nor the direct result of one discrete learning experience. Nor is intercultural competence acquired necessarily by visiting a foreign country or ad hoc through further education and training. If the assumption is correct that culture is constantly in flux, then individuals must learn and master the ability to deal with ongoing processes. The development of intercultural competence is thus complex and multidimensional and, depending on the

⁷ Hannerz, U. (1992): *Cultural Complexity*. Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁸ Deardorff (2006).

intercultural situation, can take on a variety of forms. The acquisition of intercultural competence can be construed as a continuous, dynamic process and one that involves diverse dimensions while developing and enriching itself (see graphic).



With regard to the definition (thesis 2), one may distinguish four dimensions, namely attitudes (thesis 7), comprehensive cultural knowledge and intercultural skills (thesis 8), an ability to reflect on intercultural issues as an *internal* outcome of intercultural competence (thesis 9), and an ability to interact constructively as an *external* outcome (thesis 6) of intercultural competence. The more positive the attitude, the more knowledge and skills developed and the more often intercultural situations are reflected or handled constructively, the more likely it is that a higher degree of intercultural competence is achieved. It can be assumed that all four dimensions influence each other: every instance of intercultural interaction returns to re-impact either *negatively* or *positively* on the actors' attitudes, knowledge, skills and reflection. The learning spiral makes clear that the acquisition of intercultural competence requires lifelong learning and is part of ongoing personal development.

Thesis 6: External outcome: Constructive interaction – achievement of valued objectives and avoiding violating cultural rules

Intercultural competence as understood here leads to interaction among those participating in intercultural situations that is *appropriate* and *effective* and, thus, constructive.

Appropriate interaction means that central aspects of cultural identity, key orientations and norms valued by participating actors are not (unconsciously or consciously) violated to the extent that mutual recognition is put at risk and deep disharmony is caused. Positively speaking it may mean that people use the symbols they are expected to use in the given context, as has been argued

elsewhere⁹. As already mentioned in Thesis 1, intercultural competence cannot guarantee communication, cooperation and coexistence completely free of social conflicts. Nevertheless, for individual interactants it can serve as the capacity for sensitively perceiving, identifying and mediating such conflicts grounded in cultural differences. In this sense, intercultural competence includes the capacity for anticipating and constructively coping with possible and actual conflicts in an early stage of interaction.

As to the criterion of **effective** interaction it should be noted that it principally connects intercultural competence to the model of purposive-rational action. However, numerous examples from everyday life remind us that often it is not only the fulfillment of personal goals or a task-related determination of aims that guide our actions. For instance, satisfaction in a relationship can be an example of an outcome people might want to achieve through their communication with others. Hence this paper defines *effective* communication in a broad sense: It implies that the actors actually achieve their valued individual and collective, transactional and/or relational objectives.

Thesis 7: Attitudes – Valuing cultural diversity and tolerating ambiguity

One point of departure on the road to acquiring intercultural competence is a fundamentally positive attitude towards intercultural situations. This attitude is emotional and affective 'in its core' and has motivational qualities (and is therefore not easy to develop, as professional developers of intercultural competence all know well). For the intercultural competence learning process, this positive motivation is at least as decisive as, for instance, explicit cultural knowledge that is to be learned. One of the attitudes beneficial to intercultural learning is therefore a general openness for and appreciation of cultural diversity and an ability to encounter and deal with individuals from foreign cultures in an open, curious and unprejudiced manner (i.e. by withholding ethnocentric judgment, observing and reflecting upon one's own spontaneous feelings, reactions, etc.). This openness and appreciation of cultural diversity requires particular efforts and naturally has its psychological limits. Nevertheless, constructive openness can be promoted, for example, through cultural education or language learning. A cultural blindness for foreign languages and/or cultural backgrounds can, conversely, lead to a wide range of uncertainties, fears and anxieties, which may result in defending one's own Self and offending others' identity, in conflict escalation, missed opportunities and unused potentials. A key factor in intercultural competence is, ultimately, when any uncertainties arise, that participants remain open to unknown situations and tolerant of ambiguity and that they continually reflect on these experiences.

⁹ Lustig, M.W. and J. Koester (2003): Intercultural competence. Interpersonal communication across cultures. Boston: Pearson: p. 64.

Thesis 8: Comprehensive cultural knowledge; intercultural communication, conflict and synergy management skills

The specialized competencies for taking action in an intercultural situation are complementary: comprehensive cultural knowledge and specific skills to communicate and enter into dialogue and shared praxis. Intercultural competence integrates “*knowing that*” and “*knowing how*”.

Comprehensive knowledge about those cultural elements that influence one’s own and the other’s interaction is important for behavior that is interculturally competent. This is less a matter of speaking a foreign language. Language abilities are often overemphasized elements of intercultural competence. They might be helpful but not sufficient as such for the achievement of intercultural competence. Much more, some of the key elements of comprehensive cultural knowledge are depending on action field or domain, context and situation:

- an understanding of others’ world views, values, norms and ways of life;
- an understanding of the role and impact cultural elements exert on behavior and communication;
- an understanding of historical, political and religious contexts;
- a sociolinguistic awareness of the relation between language and meaning in a societal context.

It is important to remember that the relevant cultural knowledge differs in each intercultural context and, as global knowledge, is potentially unlimited, i.e. too extensive to always be known in the intercultural context. Therefore, many experts attach much more importance to certain behavior-related (conative) communication skills than to explicitly knowledge-related (cognitive) elements. According to the specialists, to the degree that comprehensive cultural knowledge cannot be definitively known, process-oriented skills on how to handle the situation grow in importance, skills that make it possible to acquire and process (explicit and implicit) knowledge about one’s own as well as foreign ways of life, cultural determinants and practices.

Foremost among such core skills – which make it possible to continually increase overall cultural knowledge – are to listen, to observe and to interpret, as well as the ability to analyze, to evaluate and to relate cultural elements¹⁰. It can be argued that additional central aspects of intercultural competence are patterns of managing differences and resolving conflicts. Conflict management is, according to this perspective, a further building block for intercultural competence, including the highly important capacity of perceiving of and coping with different *cultural forms* of dealing with ongoing conflicts. This also includes concepts of and means for conflict resolution that avail themselves of third parties, i.e. formalised mediation. In each case, the instruments used for resolving conflicts have to be reflected upon as cultural tools, too. Many concepts and means even used in intercultural mediation are *culture-bound* and perhaps *culture-blind*.

Equally important are synergy management methods and instruments for consciously tapping the creative potential of cultural diversity (not only in the management contexts of international business but in all interculturally structured action fields).

¹⁰ C.f. Deardorff (2006).

Thesis 9: Intercultural reflection: Relativizing frame of reference and an ability to feel empathy

In addition, intercultural competence presupposes an ability to change perspective, i.e. to shift, relativize and expand or universalize one's own frame of reference and horizons of understanding and acting. Intercultural competence requires that actors be able to adapt flexibly to new intercultural situations, i.e. new communication and cooperation styles, world views, ways of life, norms and value sets (as opposed to uncritically accepting and merely reproducing them). This means, on the one hand, that one's own cultural world view and way of life is not seen as absolute, but is reflected upon, and what is known as an ethnorelative view is adopted. On the other hand, this reflection can lead to a new, affective evaluation of foreign communication and cooperation styles, world views and ways of life, norms and value sets. New elements can then be accepted cognitively and emotionally and rejection, defense or fear of the unfamiliar reduced. This is the prerequisite for developing empathy and for taking what is emotionally and cognitively recognized as foreign behavior into one's own behavioral repertoire or action potential.

Thesis 10: Intercultural competence requires intensified attention and integrated education

The multidimensional and process-oriented nature of the development of intercultural competence can hardly be appended as a supplementary learning module to existing school curricula. Instead, it is necessary to examine to what extent intercultural competence as an educational goal can be established in curricula as they are currently structured. Especially since the development of intercultural competence cannot be offered by one discipline alone and since it demands much more than what language learning or traditional cultural studies can supply, it can and must be integrated into numerous aspects of conventional school and university education.

Its individual sub-competences must be developed through diverse forms of learning and at diverse levels. Classical educational institutions can offer a continuity and a setting not only for conventional classroom learning but also for a broad range of other pedagogically guided learning experiences in which students can acquire and develop intercultural sub-competences, in particular those in the behavioral and affective areas which generally are acquired most effectively over longer periods of time and before reaching adulthood. Only when learners are offered diverse opportunities for appropriate intercultural interaction – be it through a change in their learning environment, interaction with people who hold different values, travel abroad, internships or other experiential learning measures – is it possible for intercultural competence in all its aspects to develop and be developed. The establishment of such innovative educational programs offers a wide field of potential activity.

In the area of professional development, intercultural learning can build on and expand the competences acquired at school and university (where they exist). Professional interaction all over the world is increasingly international and (inter-) culturally complex. Interaction typically takes place

with members of many different cultures, for example, in global supply chains, within international companies, or in multicultural, often virtual, teams. In such workplace settings, where development needs are more specific and specifiable than in initial education and serve both individual and *organizational* needs, it is possible and desirable to provide interactants with *individualized* and organizations with *customized* development interventions. In many countries in Europe, the US and elsewhere, intercultural competence development measures are well-established in the international, for-profit sector, in the not-for-profit sector, e.g. public administration, the scientific community, much less so.

Thesis 11: Intercultural competence requires domain-specific types of contextualization and evaluation of various kinds

The proposed preliminary definition is abstract and general. Nevertheless one should critically reflect on the usefulness of such presumably general valid definitions. It seems obvious that in different contexts and situations interculturally competent action requires different ‘combinations’ of the proposed ‘elements’, attitudes, skills, knowledge and reflection. Therefore, to move from the theory of intercultural competence to its practice, future research should not only concentrate on identifying *domain-specific types* of intercultural competence in order to test, differentiate and develop the proposed general definition. It should also develop *domain-specific types* of instruments to assess competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) in intercultural interaction.

The assessment of intercultural competence can be undertaken for a variety of purposes, for example:

- to measure the effectiveness of an educational process or development intervention;
- to measure the learning progress of a person or persons undergoing intercultural education or development;
- to raise awareness in an individual of his/her own strengths and learning potentials as a form of development;
- to measure the intercultural competence of an individual at a given point of time to help form an impression of his / her qualification for a particular task;
- to compare a person’s competence with a set of (occupational) standards.

The exact form or forms of assessment must satisfy the criteria of all assessment procedures with respect to the purpose of the assessment.

Most instruments are generally of a *quantitative* nature in that they express competence in the form of a number or a level. They tend to rely heavily on *self-report* procedures, i.e. they ask respondents to fill in a pencil-and-paper or online questionnaire about their attitudes, preferences and anticipated behaviour in intercultural situations, for example, and to indicate their answer by choosing a position on a rating scale. Such assessment instruments do not require the teachers, trainers, or researchers using them to apply their expert knowledge in making the assessment but rather in interpreting the results and in rare cases in creating the instrument themselves.

However, in the education and training context, where one may want to certify progress in developing intercultural competence in a learning process, forms of assessment which have a close link to the preceding teaching and learning activities are more usual, because they have a greater face validity and thus acceptance by learners and teachers alike. Such *qualitative* approaches thus use assessments undertaken by the teachers and trainers responsible. A few forms of assessment may employ outside expert observers .

While *quantitative* instruments may prompt socially acceptable answers and thus lead to a less objective assessment, *qualitative* approaches are highly dependent on the training and experience of the assessor, factors which may also reduce the validity and reliability of the procedure .

Recent developments which have attempted to broaden the range of approach¹¹ are a welcome and necessary addition to the repertoire of assessment procedures although much work remains to be done.

Thesis 12: A global understanding of intercultural competence does not yet exist

The origin and nature of intercultural competence and related learning processes presented here reflects a Western perspective. Overall, the research on the topic of intercultural competence discussed here refers to theories and research results of Anglo-Saxon, mainly U.S. American, and European orientation. Nearly all of the well-known concepts and models of intercultural competence (intercultural learning, training and development, etc.) are Western theoretical constructs. *Paradoxically*, even in the scientific discourses on intercultural competence, a serious and continuous intercultural dialogue re-mains a *desideratum*. When this dialogue and cooperation already take place, they include only a few colleagues from Asia, Central or South America or Africa – mostly educated and scientifically socialized at U.S. American Universities. It therefore seems natural to assume that the attention to and inclusion of non-Western perspectives, in particular rapidly developing Asian perspectives would lead to new accentuations and definitions of intercultural competence. This is because, for example, indirect forms of communication and group-related background attitudes influence the analysis of inter- and intra-social interactions in Asia much more extensively than in the West. Further research would be necessary to better understand such perspectives and a necessary step to enhance the state of the art.

Thesis 13: Concluding remarks: Universalism vs. endless relativism

In any intercultural learning situation one issue will arise ‘automatically’: what about cultural universals, i.e. universal values and norms and human rights in a world of cultural plurality and heterogeneity? It is obvious, that mutual understanding and recognition and thus human life in a globalized or glocalised world could not continue without such universals. The drawback of intercultural competence as depicted here is that it does not do away with cultural differences, but

¹¹ For instance INCA project, <http://incaproject.org>.

maintains and, to some extent, even reinforces them (consciously and intentionally). By demanding an ethno-relative view and by focusing a shift of reference and of horizons of understanding in intercultural situations, the presented concept of intercultural competence does not go beyond just building a relativistic and non-judgmental posture. What is more, the concept sketched out gives no hint of whether the search for world-wide acknowledged values, norms and rights may be part of intercultural competence, too (especially in situations of conflict mediation and resolution, for example). How participants might act on a global level despite the lack of such universals is a difficult issue the model does not address. This paper would like to advance for discussion the questions of whether and to what extent the globalized or glocalised world needs to unite around a set of binding values, norms and rights that would serve as the basis for communal existence, and, following that, how these would influence our idea of intercultural competence. Perhaps the search for commonalities is as important in intercultural competence as the sensitivity and recognition of cultural differences that have been talked about so intensively in scientific, political and everyday-life discourses on intercultural competence during the last decades.

Gütersloh / Milan, October 2008