



by Hanne Kleinemas

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Excuse me, is this the way to intercultural competence?

► How do these terms come together?

Earlier this year I found my “mission”: to explore the spheres of intercultural dialogue (ICD). The “mission” was not only inspired by the fact that I had to write my MA-thesis but also by the European Year of ICD 2008 and the fact that youth is an explicit target group of the European institutions in connection with ICD. Alongside these reasons ICD is seen as topical by youth workers in Europe due to lack of integration of an increasing number of immigrants.

In my thesis I explored ICD from a scientific and political point of view as well as from a “practical” point of view in my case study. I examined ICD situations and learning developments during the “Faith and Dialogue Training Course” in Belfast which was organised by the SALTO Cultural Diversity Resource Centre.

ICD takes place in intercultural contexts – consequently intercultural communication is involved and plays a big role. Since the field of intercultural communication is huge, I suggest going into some aspects, which will give an insight into the field, its chances and challenges. Let us start with a very basic and simple definition by Lustig and Koester (2003: 51):

“Intercultural communication occurs when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently.”

► The problem of uncertainty and unpredictability

The quote above highlights a special feature of intercultural communication – the problem of uncertainty and unpredictability in intercultural encounters. Barnlund (1989: 40f) states that all human beings need predictability and meaningfulness of things, words and the like to survive. In our every-day life, an attribution of meaning to many objects, words, intonation, etc. has already taken place. The predictability of situations enables us to react to them appropriately and verify our behaviour where necessary. This is often done “automatically” or “unconsciously”, which is useful, especially in situations that demand a quick reaction. The attribution of meaning is – in theory – absolutely arbitrary (though in practice depends on convention) and subject to the creativity of the individual. If you want to be understood in English you would call a chair “a chair”. But nobody hinders you to name it differently, like

“ein Stuhl” or even “a table”. The problem in communication “simply” is that we cannot read the other’s thoughts. However, it might be easier to follow another’s thoughts when the people involved have common features in their social and cultural backgrounds. Some similarities of attribution need to exist since they are crucial for understanding each other.

In intercultural settings, however, this predictability is reduced: A question might not have the same intonation at the end of the sentence or the same sentence structure. This could mean the other doesn’t recognise it as such. It is easy to imagine that for some people the lack of predictability causes uncertainty, which in turn can lead to further miscommunication, not understanding or misinterpretation.

► Putting things into context

When we interpret words or a situation, it is not only important what and how something is said, but also “where” or in “what context”. You may have heard a sentence like “there is not just one truth”. This becomes evident when you think of how many interpretations a certain situation can have and all of them seem to make sense. The situation is looked upon from different perspectives or is put into different contexts:

The utterance “Tickets, please! Tickets, please! ... Step to the rear of the bus, please!” (Gumperz 1982: 164f) would make sense on a bus in London. If it was said on a plane, on the other hand, you could understand it as a joke or you may assume that the person who said that must be a bit mad, since you don’t expect a conductor to check your tickets in a plane.

In intercultural encounters interpretation is more complicated since you usually choose words and behave in a way that you are used to. The same word or gesture, however, may be unsuitable in the same situation but another cultural context: A smile means satisfaction and confidence in most European cultures and contexts, whereas it can also be a sign of uneasiness and discontent in Asian cultures.

So what actually is Dialogue? The journey is the reward!

Without being able to give a proper definition of the term “dialogue”, I will introduce some salient features that are defined for instance by Bohm (1996) and Evanoff (2001). These two see dialogue from a more philosophical perspective. (It does not differ so much from what is understood by many politicians.) But as you read along, you will probably find bits and pieces yourself when you think about practical life and may question the feasibility of the concepts.

David Bohm sees **equality of/among the participants** as an important feature of dialogue. He says that this equality can be reached through a fair hearing of all parties involved. This demands of course also a certain degree of **openness** among the dialogue partners and that everyone has the chance to participate. Bohm claims that hierarchical power structures would be counterproductive to the interaction. In his eyes, a discussion – in contrast to a dialogue – aims at a win-lose situation, where the parties “play” against (i.e. not with) each other. In a dialogue, on the other hand, people aim to reach a win-win situation.

To say it differently, dialogue is not about convincing or persuading the other. (This would mean that I know everything about my opinion, but nothing or little about the others'.) It is through listening carefully to each other without judging the others' opinions that everyone can create the “same” stock of knowledge. Bohm is not saying that you should suppress your opinions and feelings. On the contrary, talking openly about facts and feelings is also important to reach what he calls “**coherence of thought**”. He stresses that if there is a coherence of meaning (or thought) the process and outcome will be much stronger and more effective. Let me sum up these three features of dialogue with David Bohm's words:

“How can you share if you are sure you have truth and the other fellow is sure he has truth, and the truths don't agree? How can you share? Therefore, you have to watch out for the notion of truth. Dialogue may not be concerned with truth – it may arrive at truth, but it is concerned with meaning. If the meaning is incoherent you will never arrive at truth.”

(Bohm 1996: 15f)

The aspects explained above suggest in a way a moral appeal and something demanding. Dialogue is also given a cooperative connotation which presupposes equality, openness and coherence of meaning. With an open mind you can receive new impulses and if you do not have a fixed aim, you are in Bohm's eyes, free to create something new together. This “new thing” should be a synergy resulting from the different inputs and opinions of the dialogue partners. Dialogue can thus be understood as a process of cooperation between the parties involved, which – according to Bohm and others – does not only imply talking, and conversations, but also concrete action.

► What is so different about *intercultural dialogue*?

Intercultural dialogue is in the first place seen as an instrument to prevent or solve conflicts etc. in intercultural encounters (Evanoff 2001, Pratt 2004). In a cross-cultural setting new contexts and frameworks are created; intercultural dialogue can offer the platform to exploit that. This means that cultural values and norms we bring with us into the dialogue situation are not self-evident and will have to be discussed and created anew through a dialogue process. If we take the opportunity to suspend our judgement of the others' opinions and scrutinise our own, ways are opened up to recognise the positive and negative aspects of both sides and thus to create a new (maybe even better) work basis. Ron G. Manley (2004) suggests that an intercultural group should create their own culture. He admits that this is time-consuming, but he also claims that people will work more effectively and together.

The described processes do not only demand respect among the people involved, but also sincerity. Both aspects are needed in dialogue in order to build up trust within the group (Bohm 1996, Carbaugh/ Boromisza-Habashi/ Ge 2006). Trust, in turn, is usually the basis from where you can and need to start your work in the group.

Especially in the context of inter-religious dialogue, it is criticised that people are unwilling to take risks and thus hold on to their own position. Again, this does not mean that you should give up your position and not have an opinion at all. Instead Kandel (2005) calls for the courage to talk about taboos and hot topics. This, of course, can threaten one's standpoint. Therefore trust among the participants and room where debate can take place, needs to be established.

Having introduced different elements of dialogue, let us have a look at the combination of intercultural dialogue and reality. Do they go well together?

Well, talking about equality, one has to include also the circumstances of the dialogue and ask, “In what way are different resources distributed?” In their concept of four types of social interaction, Jones and Gerard (1967 quoted in Thomas 2003: 148) would call this distribution in many situations an asymmetric relation of interaction, in which one interaction party has more resources in terms of know-how, power, money, etc. available. This asymmetry consequently affects ICD and the



exchange process (Scherer 1997). Scherer even recognises a tendency that ICD is used to “colonise” other societies by imparting (or even forcing) Western values on them: Does the EU really practice an exchange of know-how with developing countries or should the interaction rather be called “passing on know-how to the other”?

This “colonising attitude” however, collides with the basic tenet of ICD of being open to new interpretation and promoting equality as a main prerequisite. ICD as a tool is still more familiar to politicians and researchers than to “normal” citizens. Nevertheless there are many who use it in various contexts. The difference being that some are aware of it and others are not. If ICD is supposed to be used as the instrument for sustainable peace and conflict prevention in our intercultural societies, it needs to become a practical concept for more people, especially at the grassroots level. This is important, since the understanding of dialogue described here is an active dialogue, which demands the participants’ willingness to act and to cooperate.

► **Ready – steady – go!? What competencies do I need for intercultural dialogue?**

As there is not one truth, there is not one list of competencies that can be ticked in order to successfully hold an ICD. The examples I have chosen are taken with respect to the characteristics of ICD as described in the paragraphs above. Some aspects are especially relevant for the intercultural dimension of dialogue, which are partly also relevant for and thus derive from the field of intercultural communication; others could be seen as intracultural dialogue competencies. In general I argue for intracultural competencies, i.e. especially social skills, to be the source for intercultural competencies and the basis for any intercultural interaction no matter if it is a dialogue, discussion, conference or argument – just as you need to become conscious about your own culture in order to understand others (e.g. Thomas 2003, Mae 2003 and Castro Varela 2002).

>> **Empathy – have a look from the other side!**

Empathy is a skill that presupposes the ability to realise and understand another person’s feelings and needs, i.e. to communicate in a way that complements the moods and thoughts of others. Imagine how the other/the stranger is feeling, not how you would feel in the other’s position.

>> **Listening carefully and showing interest in the dialogue partner**

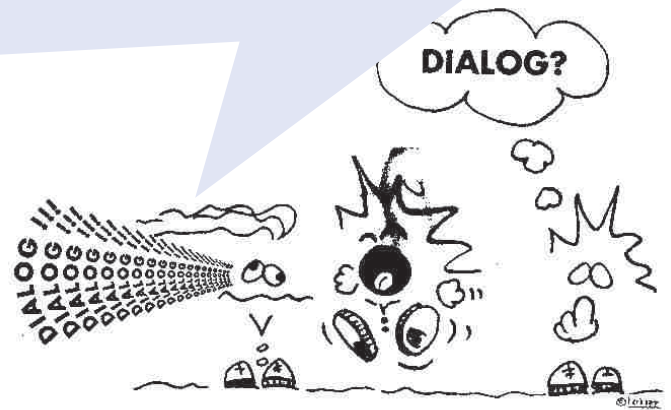
It is important to listen carefully, to be really interested in what the dialogue/communication partner is saying and to understand his or her perspective and viewpoint on the matter discussed (Lustig/Koester 2003:72ff; Gudykunst 1998: 232f). It is so important in dialogue because it implies involving the other – rather than presenting something to him or her (Scherer 1997). A presentation in turn would lead to asymmetries in the relation between the dialogue partners.

>> **Mindfulness – leave your “automatic pilot” at home**

The term “mindful” or “mindfulness” may seem strange especially to the native speakers of English among you. William B. Gudykunst (1998: 233) created this term; he says that we usually suppose that the others see the world the same way we do. To communicate mindfully, on the other hand, enables us to imagine how strangers feel. In other words, we have to become aware of our communication behaviour in order to correct or change it and make the interaction more effective (Gudykunst 1998: 31).

>> **Reflection – or: a special mirror to look into**

Tightly connected with mindfulness and the ability to become aware of one’s communicative behaviour is the skill of (critical) reflection. The cultural scientist Michiko Mae (2003) also argues for reflection on and acceptance of both one’s own limits and the strangeness of the other. This skill is essential for Bohm’s suspension of prejudices and negative feelings. ICD is about exchanging ideas, cultures and experience as well as about being open and curious for new, different things (Bohm 1996, Byram 1999: 365f). This process presupposes that we critically reflect on our own culture, values and practices. It also requires a certain amount of spontaneity and the courage to take risks since one engages with something unknown and as I mentioned earlier on in this article, there are new norms, rules and principles to be discussed and set.



Now that I’ve bombed you with a couple competencies, do you feel ready to go into dialogue? Probably yes and no, since you feel that you have some of these abilities already. The problem with these kinds of competencies is that most of them seem to be hard to grasp; they are nothing you can learn easily from a book. It’s probably also annoying that you cannot tick them on a list at one point, because there is no top-end, when you are, for example, absolutely mindful. (There is not even a guarantee that the dialogue will succeed, even if you feel competent.) There will probably always be room for improvement, and it may also happen that you find yourself competent but your communication partners don’t think so in that situation.

Anyway, to end this part of the article with a positive thought, I would like to encourage you to do something, if you don't do it already: Learning a foreign language is a very good way to open new doors for interacting with the people around you and people from other cultures. It can help to understand alternative perspectives and to understand how complicated cross-cultural communication can be. I think that the SALTO booklet "Language and Culture on Trial" gives a very practical, easy, funny and interesting insight into "adventures" in intercultural environments.

▶ Intercultural Dialogue as a political objective

Not only have scientists been discussing intercultural dialogue, but also politicians. Both the EU and the Council of Europe (CoE) have been dealing with the topic in various papers and treaties. In recent years, however, the term and idea of "intercultural dialogue" has become more concrete and explicit. The CoE is now working on a White Paper on intercultural dialogue. They preliminarily define the term as follows:

"Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's world perception."

ICD as a political strategy is in line with achieving the Lisbon goals (employment and life-long education) and also connected to "creating an ever closer union". The EU enlargement and increasing mobility have intensified contacts between people, cultures and religions. With respect to Europe's cultural diversity and equality of people and cultures, an excessive freedom cannot be given. Instead, the CoE suggests that cultural democracy is needed, which means that the protection of cultures and the recognition of their specialities are needed to enable expression of personalities and identities. ICD is thus seen as a way to acquire skills to deal with these challenges.

There is one aspect that is often forgotten when talking about cultures. Cultures, groups and nations consist of individual people. Though a person may have a collective identity as a member of a group s/he also has an individual identity. Therefore we have differences and commonalities in behaviour, opinions and understanding. Similarly Europe consists of different countries, cultures and people. Concepts such as culture, intercultural dialogue or cultural diversity may be understood differently. This again leads us to the assumption that a culture of debate is needed in which differences can be presented, discussed, understood and eventually worked with.

▶ And what about the Training Course?

In the case study of my MA-thesis I examined especially a selection of intercultural (dialogue) situations and activities. The exercises had different foci and not all of them are suitable to address aspects and competencies of ICD. The activities allow

us to experience situations in a more or less playful way, which means the gap between a kind of simulation situation of the training course and our work in real life needs to be bridged e.g. in the debriefing discussion afterwards. The participants were facing challenges that I described above as well: Different understanding of what dialogue is and different knowledge of English (the language spoken), for instance, made it difficult to create the aforementioned equality.

In my opinion there are aspects that a training course such as the SALTO one on "Faith and Dialogue" can contribute to "imparting" ICD competencies:

- Raising awareness and understanding
- Sharing experience and techniques
- Fostering self-criticism and reflection



However, the training course situation needs to be adapted to situations at home/ work. It is also the abstractness of ICD itself that makes it difficult for youth workers as well as for politicians to deal with it. Examples of good practice are often needed in order to understand the concept and find a connection to reality. Experience and practice, however, seem to be crucial in order to foster the competencies in this area.

A training course cannot be seen as a dialogue, since some of their basic aims differ. Participants of a seminar want to learn something and expect some training and guidance, whereas in dialogue there is ideally no explicit facilitation.

► What's next?

Unfortunately it was not possible for me to go into a deeper analysis for my Master-thesis. However, there is still potential. Just as the training course can be described as a starting-point for dealing with and going into ICD; the thesis can be seen as a starting-point for further research in the field. Analysing questions such as

- What are the real needs of the youth workers in terms of ICD?
 - What are the long-term learning effects of the seminar?
 - How are the youth workers going to implement the learning?
- might be helpful to design resources for ICD in European youth work.

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