CHAPTER 12

Intercultural Competence: Value Disembedding and Hyper-flexibility

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In this chapter I want to explore, critically, what kind of human being we aim to prepare when we adopt 'intercultural competence' (IC) as our educational objective in higher education. This self-reflective question is essential, I argue, if we want to arrive at justified and ethically sound decisions in our academic and pedagogical practices. To be sure, I do not want to suggest that through intercultural education we educate sociopaths or even that 'sociopathy' exists as a clinical condition, like M. E. Thomas in the following quote. Nor do I subscribe to the rather sexist portrayal of women the author perpetuates in her self-description:

> You would like me if you met me. I am quite confident about that because I have met a statistically significant sample size of the population and they were all susceptible to my charms. I have the kind of smile that is common among television show characters and rare in real life, perfect in its sparkly-teeth dimensions and ability to express pleasant invitation. I'm the sort of date you would love to bring to your ex's wedding. Fun, exciting, the perfect office escort—your boss's wife has never met anyone quite so charming.

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> And I'm just the right amount smart and successful so that your parents would be thrilled if you brought me home. (Thomas, 2013: *Confessions of a Sociopath*, p. 5)

What the description above, however, brings to the fore is the relationship between values—understood here as reasons for action—and actual behaviour, a nexus that is central to any theoretical perspective on, or pedagogical approach to, intercultural learning. As the self-diagnosed sociopath M. E. Thomas (the name is poignantly chosen) explains, she does not necessarily behave in socially undesirable ways but is rather motivated purely by instrumental reasoning. As others and their well-being are of no interest to her, her deliberations are devoid of social or moral concerns. Her highly successful adaptation to different expectations, interpersonal relations and circumstances, as described in the quote above, is thus driven by the sole purpose of enhancing her own personal gains. M. E. Thomas behaves like a self-centred, rational calculator.

I assume that academics and teachers who work in the area of intercultural communication and education care about the welfare of their students and those they come into contact with. Despite the variety of theoretical and pedagogical approaches in the field, there seems to exist a normative consensus that tolerance, open-mindedness and self-reflectivity—to name but a few qualities—are to be fostered in order to counteract the ills of stereotyping, prejudices and ethnocentrism. Instrumental reasoning, however, effectively overrides and distorts attempts for mutual recognition and increased understanding as it takes its own premises—strategic goals that are external to the communication process—as *a priori*. As M. E. Thomas, who situates herself at one end of the spectrum, puts it, 'to have the ability to measure with such stark precision the utility of a person—just as any other thing—made it senseless to regard that person in any other way' (Thomas, 2013, p. 29).

The question I pursue in this chapter is whether the concept of IC is actually conducive to the humanistic endeavour we seem to set out in our academic discourses or whether it frames our academic and pedagogic practices in a way that is detrimental to these pursuits. Intercultural education is, as many authors (Blommaert, 1995; Dervin, 2010; Holliday, 2011; Lavanchy, Dervin, & Gajardo, 2011; Risager, 2011) have pointed out, never a neutral practice, instead it is always based on particular assumptions and shaped by epistemological, ontological, normative and political commitments. I take the competence approach to intercultural learning

to be part of a wider strand of Competence-Based Forms of Education (CBE), which are based on a set of premises that draw our attention and pedagogical efforts to the creation of particular kinds of knowledge, behaviours and disposition, and thereby unavoidably marginalize others.

The chapter begins with examples of how 'IC' is articulated on university websites that promote postgraduate degrees in intercultural education/communication in the UK. Given the limited space of this chapter, the selection is necessarily constrained but nevertheless indicative of the discourse higher-educational institutions in the UK and elsewhere employ in order to justify and promote degrees, or parts thereof, in this area. I then set these outward-facing promotional texts in relation to the diversity of academic perspectives that can inform such programmes.

The following section, 'Globalization, the Global Graduate and IC', historicizes the trend towards CBE in education in general and outlines its general features. It provides answers to the question of why we conceptualize the outcomes of intercultural learning as 'competence' at higher-education institutions at this moment in time. The output and performance orientation of CBE stands, I argue in the third part of this chapter, in stark contrast to the idea of intercultural learning as a reflective engagement with difference, and hence with the reasons we and others have for being, acting and relating to each other the way they do. The last section draws the different threads together and explores an alternative and potentially more desirable view of intercultural education.

Globalization, the Global Graduate and IC

Curricular objectives are commonly justified in relation to the contemporary demands of society, however these may be defined. Intercultural education, in particular, is usually legitimized by references to 'globalization' or, to a lesser extent, 'internationalization'. Students, it is argued, should be prepared for the exigencies of a rapidly changing and interconnected world and labour market. The University of Durham, for instance, describes on its website how the MA in *Intercultural Education and Internationalisation* will provide students.

> with the resources for reflecting on and responding to the growing need for intercultural education and communication in an increasingly intercultural/international world. […] Throughout the programme you will be encouraged to reflect on your own knowledge and experience of education,

> and the challenges of developing learners who are interculturally competent for the contemporary world.

Likewise, the University of Manchester emphasizes the need to 'function effectively' in the 'global era' for their MA in *Intercultural Communication*:

> The global era has stimulated transnational cultural flows (of people, practices and products) and local cultural complexities that were inconceivable even a generation ago. Nowadays, individuals increasingly recognise not only their own cultural complexity but also the need to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts ranging from the home and neighbourhood, to places of worship and recreation, to organisations and workplaces, and to societies and regions.

The aim of the MA in *Intercultural Communication* at the University of Sheffield is, according to the departmental website, simply 'to prepare you for work. We look closely at best practice and show you how to apply theory to real work situations'. A similar pronouncement can be found on the website of the University of Warwick, which justifies their MSc in *Intercultural Communication for Business & the Professions* by claiming: 'Employers need graduates who can compete in global marketplaces and meet global challenges'. Their website provides a wealth of information, partly based on a collaborative eLearning project staff members conducted with Chinese partners (http://www.echinauk.org/intro.php). According to the *Global People Competency Framework* developed on the basis of this project, IC includes 'knowledge and ideas', 'communication skills', the ability to build and maintain 'relationships', and 'personal qualities/dispositions'. The personal qualities, for instance, revolve around flexibility and adaptability, balanced by coping strategies and closely tied to strategic goals:

> We need to have the motivation to seek out variety and change (**spirit of adventure**) while having a strong internal sense of where we are going (**inner purpose**). Emotionally we need to possess well-developed methods of dealing with stress (**coping**) as well as remaining positive when things go wrong (**resilience**). We also need to be conscious that are [sic] own behaviour, while normal for us, may be considered strange in another cultural context (**self-awareness**) and positively accept different behaviours that may immediately seem to go against our sense of what is normal and appropriate

> (**acceptance**). We thus need to be willing to adapt our behaviour to suit other cultural contexts, and to sustain trust with key partners. [emphasis in the original]

Websites of other post- and undergraduate programmes in intercultural education/communication in the UK and other Western European countries show a similar argumentative pattern (see, e.g., Zotzmann, 2011). 'Globalization' or a variant of the term is presented as a quasi-natural cause that generates change and requires an immediate educational response: vocationally relevant and applicable knowledge that is delivered in the form of 'competence' and its subcomponents. Given the limited space of this chapter it is not possible to analyse these representations and their rhetorical function but we need to bear in mind that globalization is a highly contested term that can refer to a multitude of different, often contradictory developments in the domains of business, politics, society, culture, technology, media, and the environment. As Jessop (2013, 1999, see also Hirst & Thompson, 2009) has pointed out, there is actually no single causal force that cuts across changes in all social spheres on a global scale and produces the same effects on people in different locations. The idea of an acceleration and intensification of global interaction, communication and mobility in particular—as articulated in the above pronouncement and many academic publications (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2011; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011, p. 303)—seems to reflect only the reality of rather privileged segments of society. In the wake of the 'Great Recession' and concomitant austerity regimes, international travel, higher education and high levels of consumption have receded into a dim distance even for many in the 'Global North'.

Instead of illuminating the nature of social change, the term 'globalization' is hence often employed as a short-hand rhetorical device or 'imaginary' that legitimates particular courses of action: For the case of higher education, it is used to justify the claim that students shall be enabled to act and to function effectively in contexts characterized by diversity. Again, it is important to remind ourselves that human diversity is neither new nor a 'by-product of globalization' (Cogo, 2012, p. 288), instead it is part of the human condition (Parekh, 2000). What is, however, relatively new and contentious is the emphasis on competent *performance*, which links the concept of IC with the current employability and internationalization strategies of universities. These strategies in turn are largely driven by the marketization and privatization of higher education.

Despite the discursive similarity of university websites, the pronouncements regarding the specifics of IC and its sub-components vary. This is mirrored in the academic literature: IC can include attitudes and dispositions (such as self-reflexivity, respect, tolerance, curiosity, flexibility, openness, empathy), knowledge (for instance of foreign languages, or about similarities and differences in communicative conventions and practices), and behaviours, skills and strategies (related to communication and the effective interpretation and negotiation of meaning, for example). Models of IC can either be 'compositional' (specifying individual components without necessarily clarifying the relationships between them), 'developmental' (emphasizing the sequence of acquisition), 'causal' (focusing on causal relationships between different components and stages), 'co-orientational' (stressing the procedural aspects) or adaptational (accentuating the adjustment of attitudes, understanding and behaviours towards others (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

The respective view of what IC actually exists of depends on a range of decisions taken on the theoretical, methodological and political-normative level (for overviews see Risager, 2007, 2011; Zotzmann, 2014). Theoretical assumptions about underlying concepts such as *culture*, *identity*, *language* and *communication* and their interrelationship can be articulated from rather essentialist perspectives at one end of the spectrum to postmodern or poststructuralist (anti-essentialist) understandings at the other. Whereas proponents of the former (e.g., Hofstede, 1991, 1994; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) view culture as a mindset of people who live in a particular national or regional territory, authors influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralist thinking strongly object to the idea of homogeneous groups and emphasize the inherent fluidity and diversity of all cultural processes. Authors such as Byram (1997, 2009) seem to have moved to some degree from the former perspective to the latter over time.

Notwithstanding, the term competence cuts across ontological and normative differences and has been embraced by a variety of authors. The most influential model was developed by Byram in his book *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (1997). Commissioned by the Council of Europe, the model was intended to provide clearly defined and measurable components of IC in the context of foreign-language learning. Byram divided IC into five *savoirs*: Knowledge about different cultures, the ability to 'to operate' the 'knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and

interaction' (p. 61), the willingness to learn more about other cultural practices, openness towards relativization of taken-for-granted assumptions, and the ability to critically evaluate cultural products and practices.

In 2013, Houghton attempted to revise Byram's model by adding *savoir se transformer*: the ability to change based on conscious decisions (Houghton, 2013, p. 313). Her approach is interesting as it emphasizes the importance of values in intercultural learning. The author assumes that particular stages in the development of IC are identifiable and can, therefore, potentially be subjected to formative or summative assessment. The five distinct and sequential phases which, according to her, can be made 'visible in potentially assessable ways' (Houghton, 2013, p. 311) include at the lower end an 'analysis of self', in particular one's own values, followed by 'analysis of Other': an exploration of the values of the interlocutor by using non-judgmental, empathy-oriented communication strategies' (Houghton, 2013, p. 312). In stage 3 ('Critical Analysis') students are guided towards the identification of similarities and differences between these two different sets of values, which they then evaluate in stage 4 according to 'explicit criteria'. In the final stage ('Identity-Development') they decide whether or not to change in response to the dialogue with the interlocutor. Note that change is at the centre of this framework, a point which I will come to back later.

Authors who are informed by postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas share the idea that culture and identity are always multiple, complex and in a constant state of being made and remade (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Dervin, 2011; Kramsch, 2009; Risager, 2007). The focus is on what culture *does*, namely the active construction of meaning. Culture, as Street (1993, p. 23) famously phrased it, 'is a verb'. Kramsch (2009, pp. 118, 2011), for example, stresses the need to see beyond the dualities of national languages and national cultures and calls for the development of 'symbolic competence', which she defines as 'less a collection of *savoirs* or stable knowledges and more a savviness, i.e., a combination of knowledge, experience and judgment'. Holliday (2011), Kumaravadivelu (2008) and Canajagarah (2012) likewise argue, albeit from different philosophical positions, that culture is not an entity that pre-exists communication but a category that individuals draw upon when they co-construct identities in instances of communication. All three authors, therefore, call for critical cultural awareness and the ability to deconstruct (neo)essentialist and unjust discourses and representations of 'self' and 'other'. My position is probably closest to this group of authors—diverse as they are.

I agree for example with Kramsch's (2009) poststructuralist view that we need to understand the 'discursive practices between people who speak different languages and occupy different and sometimes unequal subject positions' (p. 360), but in order to so, I argue later in this chapter, we actually need to understand the social, economic and political conditions that enable particular subject positions.

A very different perspective on IC is advanced by researchers inspired by postmodernism who investigate the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Jenkins et al. (2011, p. 297) for instance, in their account of IC, emphasize flexibility above all, and the willingness and ability to accommodate and negotiate meaning in complex situations with speakers from different 'lingua-cultures'. In a similar vein Nunn (2011) claims that IC includes the abilities to 'negotiate interim pragmatic norms with interlocutors' (Nunn, 2011, p. 11) and to 'adjust to unpredictable multicultural situations' (Nunn, 2011, p. 8). According to this author, transferability between contexts is key:

> Transferability is the ability to use, adjust or develop knowledge and skills learnt in one context in unknown and often unpredictable contexts. All communication can require us to deal with the unpredictable but Intercultural Communicators need to be even more prepared for the unexpected. (Nunn, 2011, p. 11)

The decontextualization of IC and the decentring of the subject is particularly pronounced by Finkbeiner (2009), who uses the metaphor of the *Global Positioning System* (GPS). She argues that currently we are being 'exposed, surrounded and influenced by many different cultural representations and perspectives' (Finkbeiner, 2009, p. 152) and, therefore, need to be able to process and adapt to this multiplicity. One's 'prior knowledge, belief system and values' (Finkbeiner, 2009, p. 155) has, therefore, to be constantly relativized in relation to incoming 'new data' from other incongruent perspectives.

The perspectives reviewed here show that the term IC is an 'empty signifier' that can be filled with a variety of meanings depending on the ontological, epistemological and normative position of the respective author. Despite substantial differences in theoretical perspectives, there is a noticeable shift from defining IC as cognitive knowledge to more procedural views. My present concern, however, cuts across the structuralist or poststructuralist/

postmodernist divide. I engage with views that hold that dispositions, knowledge, behaviour and strategies are identifiable, predictable, teachable, learnable and, at least in principle, measurable (Stevens, 2010, p. 190). The common focus on outcomes and performance is, as I outline in the following section, characteristic of CBE.

CBE and Intercultural Education

CBE emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of vocational education and training in the USA and Europe. They have since become ubiquitous in a large number of countries and a variety of institutions, covering the primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Arguelles & Gonczi, 2000).

The salient feature of CBE in comparison with other educational discourses is the emphasis on competent performance and applicability of knowledge. Students are meant to be able to *act* on the basis of what they learned; knowledge that is not 'useful' for real-world tasks becomes marginalized. CBE is thus closely linked to the idea that educational institutions have to respond primarily to the demands of the economic sphere rather than, for example, civil society. As the University of Warwick expresses it: 'As employers' requirements for their global workforce change, graduates […] must adapt to prosper' (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/degrees/msc/). In the wake of this shift of focus, the arts and humanities, the social sciences and physical education—all of which do not generate tangible surplus value—have experienced cuts in funding across a variety of contexts in the UK higher-education system. Internationally, curricula have become strikingly similar in their emphasis on vocationally relevant knowledge that is immediately applicable in real-world contexts ('employability'), that can be assessed for its market value ('competence'), and that needs to be constantly updated ('lifelong learning').

In order to turn novices into competent agents in professional areas, the effective performances of experts in specific task-based situations have to be identified, described and then segmented into competence standards:

> Competence-based education tends to be a form of education that derives a curriculum from an analysis of a prospective or actual role in modern society and that attempts to certify student progress on the basis of demonstrated performance in some or all aspects of that role. (Grant et al., 1979, p. 6, cited in Biemans, Nieuwenhuis, Poell, Mulder, & Wesselink, 2004)

Although descriptors of IC are not usually derived from empirical research on 'experts' (e.g., successful multilingual interlocutors), the identified behaviours, dispositions and knowledge are nevertheless assumed to generate 'effective' intercultural communication. Once identified, these competences and their sub-components suggest objectivity, clarity and accountability of the learning process. Byram and Guillherme (2010, p. 5) have already pointed to the inherent contradiction of the terminology:

> The expression intercultural competence seems to entail quite paradoxical meanings within it. The concept of competence is often used to seize the dynamics of something fluid and unpredictable implied by an intercultural relation and communication with notions of skills, abilities and capacities, and then to describe and evaluate them. On the other hand, the word intercultural expresses the impact of the unexpected, the surprising, the potential rather than the pre-structured, the foreseen or the expectable.

As Jones and Moore (1995, p. 81) describe it, CBE is particularly attractive to administrators and policy makers because of the 'disaggregation of different skills and measurable standards of performance', rather than its 'intrinsic viability'. For the case of intercultural learning this outcome and performance orientation is particularly problematic. Again here, questions arise as to what particular competences and their sub-components such as 'reflectivity', 'open-mindedness', 'flexibility', and 'adaptability'—to name but a few—mean in concrete terms. Rather than abstract and monolithic dispositions that can be taught, observed in performance and validated as 'outcomes', they are highly context-specific attitudes based on people's evaluations of the particular situation they find themselves in. For the same reason, the manifestation of these dispositions is not absolute but gradual:

Individuals might be *more or less* reflective or *more or less* open-minded, depending on an infinite number of situational, psychological, emotional, sociocultural and other factors by which human beings are influenced. Developing explicit criteria for what counts as a successful manifestation of a particular level of disposition in a particular context would constitute a monumental task.

Time and space are other factors that raise concerns. Whereas professional experts, for instance, acquire their knowledge through long-term involvement and practice in real-world contexts, students are assumed to reach similar performance levels in a far shorter time span and mostly inside a classroom, a space that is characterized by entirely different interpersonal

relations from the target situation. In the case of intercultural education this raises a variety of questions, above all how engagement with diversity can be fostered in a social space (the university) that is effectively closed off to the majority of people by gate-keeping mechanisms such as academic entry requirements, language exams, and tuition fees (in the case of for-profit or semi-privatized institutions). Most approaches to intercultural education circumvent this problem through a focus on social constructions of otherness in a variety of written, spoken and multimodel texts. There is little research, to my knowledge, that validates whether deconstruction as a pedagogic strategy influences actual behaviour in the real world, especially in situations of conflict. It is also unclear how a university can 'produce' interculturally competent graduates in the pre-specified time frame of their respective degree programme, that is, what kind of endpoint of intercultural learning can be reasonably reached at the time of graduation. The criteria for a communicative behaviour to count as 'successful' or 'effective' or, for that matter, 'unsuccessful' or 'ineffective' are usually not made explicit.

In addition to this, tasks or problems might be ill-defined. A reassessment and reframing of a particular problem requires, however, knowledge and critical reflection rather than flexibility and accommodation strategies. One has to engage in depth with the specifics of the context and situation, the interests that are at stake, and the values individuals hold in relation to them. The intercultural literature, however, often shies away from an engagement with problems rooted in social and material realities. This applies to both structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives: Whereas the former tend to 'culturalize' socioeconomic issues, postmodern and poststructuralist approaches often focus squarely on the discursive level. As I discuss in the next section, this detachment from the circumstances and conditions people find themselves in and refer to cannot do justice to the nature of lay normativity and is, therefore, ill-equipped to account for the reasons people have for being, acting and relating the way they do.

Lay Normativity and the Nature of Values

As outlined earlier, the ideal competent intercultural speaker is often portrayed as highly flexible, self-reflective, open to accommodate others and willing to change in the process. Altering one's socioculturally influenced taken-for-granted assumptions, habitual practices, and values is, however, not a straightforward matter and can hardly be described as a 'competence'

(Byram, Bribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Coulby, 2006). Values, in particular, are no simple 'social constructs': Humans generally aim to flourish and avoid suffering and, therefore, need continuously to evaluate their environment, themselves and others, their actions and those of others, and the reciprocal effects of these behaviours (Sayer, 2011, p. 18). Values are thus essential to our well-being and integral to our perception and assessment of the world. They refer to.

> things we consider worth cherishing and realizing in our lives. Since judgments of worth are based on reasons, values are things we have good reasons to cherish, which in our well-considered view deserve our allegiance and ought to form part of the good life. (Parekh, 2000, p. 127)

This means that people usually do not act upon and relate to the world in a hyperflexible manner, ready to constantly accommodate to others and to relativize their own taken-for-granted assumptions. On the contrary, they commonly have a stake in particular situations and morally evaluate what they experience. They might be self-reflective and open to change their perceptions and dispositions but it is neither realistic nor desirable to prioritize flexibility and accommodation as these qualities are largely context-dependent. Tolerance, for instance, is a concept that is often used in descriptions of IC, but tolerance is by no means a transferable disposition; instead it is closely tied to an evaluation of a specific situation. The same individual who might be tolerant in one situation might choose not to be in a different context, and for particular reasons. The same applies to respect: In response to Tony Blair's call to teach school children to 'respect religion' in order to counter religious radicalization, Frances (2014) argues: 'Respect per se cannot provide children with the skills they need to navigate their relationships with each other, or in the wider world outside of the school gates. And in any case, not all ideas are worthy of respect'. Instead of treating—in this case—religion as something problematic that needs 'respect' Frances suggests enhancing knowledge about religion, as well as non-religious identities. This 'religious literacy' would help children to engage critically 'with ideologies and ideas, not just [be] aware of their contours'. The fact that people have reasons for being, acting and relating in particular ways does not mean that these values cannot be misguided, fallacious or ideological. They refer to a reality outside themselves but are also mediated through discourses in specific sociocultural contexts. The appeal to tolerance itself is, for example, very

often imbued with power relations, that is, it is commonly addressed to members of a majority with the resources to exert influence on minorities in the hope that they will refrain from doing so (Mendus, 1989, p. 8). Tolerance is thus very often reduced to 'a form of charity' (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013, p. 1015). The fact that values are discursively mediated and licensed through specific historically shaped social practices should, however, not lead to the conclusion that they do not have a referent outside their own. As a matter of fact, their fallibility makes it all the more necessary to engage with the aspect of social reality to which they actually refer. Willingness to change is at least partially dependent on the availability of competing accounts.

Confronting individuals with competing or maybe even better accounts will not necessarily bring about transformative learning as Houghton (2013), as described above, seems to assume. The degree and depth of self-reflectivity and willingness to change ultimately depends on the respective subject: Individuals react in different ways to experiences that are incongruent with their current frames of reference; some are more reflective, others might resist taking into account competing viewpoints or refuse to change on the basis of discrepancies (Archer, 2003). Individuals also differ in terms of previous experiences and critical events in their lives, which set the stage for their cognitive and emotional openness. They differ in terms of their knowledge, understanding, judgements and creativity, among a variety of other capabilities that are essential for learning (Sayer, 2011). Thus, while we can encourage intercultural learning, we cannot, on the basis of what we teach, expect students to change, let alone *perform* competently in contexts of diversity—whatever that is supposed to mean. We also need to be very careful not to assume that we, as teachers, enjoy privileged access to a 'rationally ordered "transcultural" totality' (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013, p. 1008). Our own claims are, of course, also fallible and contested, and we need to constantly turn our attention to these taken-for-granted assumptions in dialogue with others. Ultimately, as the same authors (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013, p. 1016) argue, 'it is necessary to strive not to finish with just *the one*—but all the time to keep a reflexive eye on *the many*'.

To repeat, I am not advocating that we abolish concepts such as tolerance, open-mindedness or self-reflectivity. On the contrary, I think they are essential for intercultural education, and intercultural education can, in turn, contribute to the common good. My argument is purely that these cannot be conceptualized as context-independent pre-defined

sub-components of 'competence'. Instead, it is important to engage with the reasons individuals have for valuing one form of being, acting and relating in particular contexts. To this end, we have to take seriously the social and material realities people inhabit, refer to and have a stake in, and this requires engagement with economic, political and sociological theory, both in our academic reasoning and pedagogic practice.

The disengagement with the social and material reality people inhabit and with the reasons they have for valuing what they value, does not only lead to conceptual and pedagogic problems, it can also entail ethical relativism. We might perpetuate the idea that values are individual preferences and as such not susceptible to different interpretations and critical reflection. Again, this is a gross misunderstanding of the nature of values, as Dupré (2001, p. 129) explains:

> The most obvious point is that to treat altruism, morality, or accepted social norms simply as tastes that some people happen to have—I like candy and fast cars, you like morality and oysters—is grossly to misplace the importance of norms of behaviour in people's lives. Morality is what for many people makes sense of their lives, not just one among a range of possible consumables. Perhaps there are people for whom what primarily makes sense of their lives is the acquisition of cars or oysters. But most of us, I suppose, would consider this pathological, and would not consider that such lives made much sense.

The reasons for this disengagement are varied. As outlined earlier, over the past decades, research on interculturality has tended towards a predominantly anti-essentialist stance and stressed the fluidity, performativity and inherent hybridity of all cultural processes. Friedman (2002, p. 24) identifies

> a fascination as well as a desire for the hybrid, not just as an interesting meeting between cultures but as a kind of solution to what is perceived as one (if not the major) problem of humankind, *essentialism*, in the sense of collective identification based on similarity, imagined or real, on the shared values and symbols that are so common in all forms of 'cultural absolutism'.

According to the same author, anti-essentialists do not only critique nation-based categories in terms of their underlying essentialist concepts, categories and assumptions, they reject the entire 'family of terms that convey closure, boundedness' (Friedman, 2002, p. 25). They attempt to

reveal the constructed nature of such categories, and try to show the 'true' hybrid and contingent nature of societies. Sayer (1999, p. 34, see also Fay, 1996, p. 113) describes this theoretical perspective as 'interpretivism', designating a 'tendency to reduce social life wholly to the level of meaning, ignoring material change and what happens to people, regardless of their understandings'.

While anti-essentialists are right in their critique of discourses and practices that label groups of people in ways that suppress difference, essentialism is neither always associated with nationalist ideas nor is it *essentially* wrong:

> essentialists need not assert that all members of a class are identical, in every respect, only that they have some features in common. It is therefore not necessarily guilty of homogenising and 'flattening difference'; it all depends which features are held to be essential, and it is a substantive, empirical question—and not a matter of ontological fiat—whether such common, essential properties exist. (Sayer, 2011, p. 456)

The problem, as the same author points out, is thus not the assertion of sameness or difference, but the mistaken attribution or denial of particular characteristics. Racism, for instance, is wrong on both counts, as it is based on the one hand on 'spurious claims about differences which actually have no significance, and on the other denial of differences—through the stereotyping characteristic of cultural essentialism—which are significant' (Sayer, 2011, p. 457). Conversely, denying sameness and 'asserting instead difference to the point of implosion into "de-differentiation"' (McLennan, 1996, quoted in Sayer, 2011, p. 455) runs into the danger of overlooking durable structures and power relations that influence individuals.

Evaluations and (mis)representations of others are not exclusively based on essentialist categories in people's minds; they are often rooted in socioeconomic differences and injustices. This, however, is the pressing question that an understanding of culture as fluid and procedural leaves open; namely what kind of meanings become articulated in a particular communicative situation, by whom and for what kind of reasons. In other words, we need to put.

> semiotic processes into context. This means locating them within their necessary dialectical relations with persons (hence minds, intentions, desires, bodies), social relations, and the material world—locating them within the practical engagement of embodied and socially organised persons with the material world. (Fairclough, Jessop, & Sayer, 2001, p. 7)

Conclusion: The Hyperflexible Intercultural Being

My intention in this chapter was to provide an answer to the question of whether it is theoretically sensible and ethically desirable to conceptualize the outcomes of intercultural learning as 'competence'. My argument was twofold. First, CBE prioritizes performance over reflection and thus distort attempts for mutual recognition and increased understanding. Second, CBE is ill-equipped to account for lay-normativity as it ignores the reasons people have for being, acting and relating to others in particular contexts. It is thus unlikely to bring about the transformative learning that intercultural educators seem to strive for.

A competence-based approach to intercultural education seems to have little intrinsic validity. Instead it is driven by the marketization of the education sector and the concomitant pressure to provide a well-trained and flexible workforce. The global graduate is supposed to embody the qualities employers look for in an ideal way: She is internationally versatile, ideally multilingual, and effective in contexts of diversity. Due to her flexibility she can be relocated, will voluntarily go wherever job opportunities arise, and can adapt to local circumstances. She is willing to distance herself from her taken-for-granted assumptions and to relativize her values according to the demands of the situation. In summary, the interculturally competent global graduate is the ideal 'entrepreneurial self' who regulates her own conduct according to the demands of the market:

> she is not just an employee or student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of her résumé, a biographer of her rationales, and an entrepreneur of her possibilities. […] The *summum bonum* of modern agency is to present oneself as *eminently* flexible in all and every respect. (Mirowski, 2013, p. 108)

This hyperflexibility comes—normally—with emotional costs. As the Competency Framework for Global People, Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) H. & Stadler, S. (2009). has quite correctly identified, global graduates also need coping strategies and resilience.

I would suggest that we need to re-think our own values—or reasons for action—as academics and teachers who aim to foster intercultural learning in our students. In order to contribute to a more just and

equal society—if we choose these to be our aims—that offers better conditions for mutual understanding and recognition, we need to move away from the idea that higher education is there to provide a 'useful', adaptable and flexible workforce for highly volatile labour markets. Although one function of the university is surely to educate competent professionals, higher education also has its own *raison d'être* (Barnett, 1990, p. 8): It has a vital social role in enhancing scientific *as well as* cultural, human and social development. This is particularly important in the current context where few social spheres are unscathed by alleged 'logic' of the market:

> If there are tendencies in modern society for thought, discourse and action to be constrained by a number of dominant forces, higher education has the function of helping to maintain and develop a plurality of styles of thought and action. In this sense, higher education has to be a countervailing force. (Barnett, 1990, pp. 65–66)

In the case of intercultural education, we might start by rejecting the output, performance orientation and concomitant terminology of the competence approach altogether.

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