Recommendations for an Intercultural Competence Approach

The following recommendations for an intercultural competence approach are based on the recommendations proposed in "Intercultural Competence" by Jürgen Bolten (2012):

1. Understanding cultures

In order to be able to understand one's own and foreign cultures adequately, as many forms of expression of these cultures as possible must be taken into account in an equal manner. In this context, it is inadmissible to differentiate between cultural products of higher or lower value, as e.g. canon formations committed to one's own concept of culture try to suggest. This is also true for cultural comparisons. There are no more or less "advanced" or "more developed" cultures, since it is always a matter of very specific complex systems, which elude such comparisons precisely because the common basis for comparison is missing. On the other hand, the urged equal validity of cultures must not be confused with indifference. The value neutrality sought with the lifeworld concept of culture by no means excludes, for example, a critique of the violation of human rights.

2. Avoid categorisations of cultures

Even if it seems advisable from a pragmatic point of view to speak of, for example, a "French" or an "English" culture for better orientation, one should be aware that such labels always contain generalisations and inaccuracies. The French or the English do not exist. There are, at best, millions of French and English individuals, each of whom has a common language, and in some cases similar socialisation and educational backgrounds, but who may well be completely "atypical" as individuals and thus may ultimately cause cultures to change in terms of accepted values and behaviours. In this respect, caution is advised with guide books that categorise cultures (e.g. into "authoritarian", "polychronic", "male", "context-oriented"). Even if one does not want to, stereotyping is encouraged in this way.

3. Consider historical contexts of cultures

Just as important as the description of cultures is the explanation of their historically developed system interrelationships. Travel reports, travel guides or cultural information are mostly dedicated to the description level only. If one restricts oneself to such a description, this can easily have the consequence that one does not understand certain facts as results of an independent foreign cultural development due to ignorance of the background, but that one interprets them from the perspective of own cultural norms. Thus it happens that, for example, certain actions are booked under "corruption" from the German point of view, which seem perfectly natural and morally correct from the perspective of other culture members. To prevent such misinterpretations and misunderstandings, cultural knowledge should always be historically underpinned. It is important here to understand developmental contexts. This excludes any factual-historical approach ("time tables") and even more so monocausal attempts at explanation.

4. Develop social skills in intercultural trainings

As tempting as it may be to follow rules of conduct for dealing with members of foreign cultures: Lists of "dos and taboos," a "cultural etiquette manual," or the like are usually of little use, because in intercultural contact no one behaves as they would in their own culture (and for whom such rules of conduct may still apply in a very generalised form). Behaviour in intercultural situations, on the other hand, is essentially determined by foreign images, by previous intercultural experiences, by the degree of familiarity of the interacting persons, or even by the language chosen. In order to be able to act successfully in such situations, behavioural competencies such as empathy, role distance, tolerance, flexibility or the ability to "endure" contradictions are required. These skills are taught as part of intercultural awareness training.

5. Discover and understand foreignness

Intercultural competence is also related to the diversity of one's own experiences of foreignness. Those who are not only open-minded towards the unknown, but also show a willingness to actively discover and understand what is foreign, will be able to react much more flexibly and appropriately in intercultural situations.

Ignoring the foreign or shying away from the unknown is often done out of convenience or fear of insecurity. Such behaviour benefits neither the foreign nor "one's own" because parallel worlds are created in which it is difficult for innovative developments to take place due to a lack of new "input". Even if the persistence in the face of the unknown, if the desire to understand the implausible can lead to the breaking of one's own everyday routines and perhaps even cause feelings of fear, the confrontation with the unfamiliar is fundamentally enriching because it enables new experiences that can expand one's own horizons - in whatever way.

6. Promote self-understanding and self-reflection

We cannot discover and understand the foreign if we do not reflect on our own - especially the relationship between our own and the foreign. For this reason, activities on intercultural competence development should always include the promotion of self-understanding and the knowledge of the connections between one's own and the foreign culture.

7. Make the unknown familiar

Prejudices and stereotypes are not per se a failure condition for intercultural communication. However, we should be aware of the consequences of using stereotypes and prejudices and force ourselves to take as differentiated a view as possible. In this context, it is important to understand the contexts in which, for example, stereotypes are formed in other cultures as foreign stereotypes in relation to one's own culture. This has a lot to do with wanting to understand the other at least up to certain extent. This understanding does not necessarily mean accepting the other's ways of thinking and behaving. First of all, it is the otherness as such that is to be accepted, whereby this also never presents itself as the absolute other, but always only as the more or less other, unknown. Accordingly, intercultural competence also consists of the ability to make the unknown more familiar, to include it in one's own reciprocity network without appropriating it.

Accommodation processes should be moderated as processes of conscious and guided dialogue between source and receiving cultures. This is the task of intercultural coaches (and, if necessary, mediators).

8. Promote collaboration in multicultural scenarios

Multicultural scenarios should be structured in such a way that - while preserving monocultural refuges - as many incentives for joint action as possible are created. These incentives should be formulated as vaguely as possible and as concretely as necessary - but, if possible, largely developed by the participants themselves. What is possible and what is necessary will vary greatly from case to case. For example, a multicultural kindergarten naturally operates under different conditions than a multicultural youth club or than a company.

9. Increase awareness of positive and negative effects of integration processes

Even if we understand integration as a two-way process, there are factors that can have a negative impact in addition to those that promote it. These include a long phase of enculturation in the original culture, a lack of diversity of experience, either/or thinking, ethnic isolation (residential areas, group formation) and pressure to adapt on the part of the new environment. Positive factors include curiosity about the unfamiliar, willingness to learn, recognition of the added value of unfamiliar experiences, willingness to negotiate in terms of scope for acceptance, both/and thinking, ability to think in networks and very good knowledge of the "intercultural language".