Teachers Intercultural Competences

as Keystone to Learning in Europe

(TICKLE)

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Project information

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1. The task of the external consultant

The task of the external consultant within the Tickle Project was fourfold:

- Facilitate the meetings of the Executive Committee and supporting the European project coordinator in the steering of the project

- Facilitating the working sessions of the project group during the meetings in order to allow the partners to fully concentrate on the subject matter

- Providing reflective ideas and occasional input with reference to the content. By doing this the consultant was functioning as a conceptual sparring partner by applying experiential and conceptual knowledge from other fields where intercultural issues have been dealt with

- Providing project management methodological support in the various phases of the project

The consultant attended seven of the eight three-and-a-half-day project meetings (one meeting had to be missed due to illness) including preparation and debriefing and in between kept regular contact with the European project coordinator.

Consultants work is mostly backstage and background. When things go well, its effects are mostly of catalytic nature. The following report is based on this assumption and professional ideal and consists mostly of observations and considerations around the processes of the project and created from an "outside" perspective. This seems functional as the main issues around the subject matter of the project and the qualitative results are described in the various national reports.

2. The Project Approach in the Eyes of an External Observer

The objective of the project was the creation of didactical tools which can be applied in different cultural settings. Therefore the project was compiled of practitioners who themselves were dealing with very different variations of intercultural issues in the context of teacher education. May it be dealing with ethnic minorities in the school system, teaching children with a migration background, contributing to the protection of indigenous culture or educating teachers in a bicultural environment, the variety of what "intercultural" can mean on an operational level in the teacher training world was mirrored in the project group in an intensive way.

Such a variety makes it difficult to go through the necessary activities of "alignment" in such a project. Given the very complex and innovative first-time character of the conceptual task, the working group is forced to go through an intense process of reaching understanding and to deal with an ever increasing variety of applicable mental models.

The group chose the classic approach of Bennett as a first orienting terminology and descriptive framework and this choice turned out to be solid enough for the

necessary processes of comparing, discovering and the production of a common understanding.

3.   The logic of the working steps

As it is always the case in such a complex working environment the group had to develop its own pattern of working steps. In order to find out whether the tools to be created carry enough potential applicability in different contexts the members had to experiment with various forms of mixing conceptual and experiential phases in the development of the tools. If possible one chose to use local students as a sort "guinea pigs" and explore the value of the prototypes developed so far. This procedure created incredibly rich feedback and learning but was not always possible because of language and organizational conditions. Therefore the group switched to other testing methods, i.e. applying tools from one country in the didactic context of another country and then giving feedback on necessary modifications and the like. This approach was delicate because of the endless pitfalls of offending the first originators when it had to be reported that a tool needed modification. The group exposed itself to such communicative stress and developed an outstanding bravery and boldness in dealing with these issues.

Such a procedural pattern asks for repetitive steps of checking underlying assumptions which created an extra workload.

The group experimented and discussed several forms of how to structure the intercultural task in such a way that a kind of "universal metastructure" could serve all the different intercultural situations. Here the consultant could assist in the subject matter by adding experiences from other fields. The final result was a process model of intercultural competence which turned out to be general enough in the applicable stretching and orienting enough in its discriminating quality. By doing so the group developed in a parallel working process a "language" for the further discourse of intercultural competencies in various settings.

4.   Some significant ambivalences the group had to deal with

While going through the process of collecting, creating and testing the various tools the Tickle group had to manage several reoccurring ambivalences which seem to be crucial for the applicability of the developed tools in other cultural/pedagogical/institutional contexts. From the external consultants perspective three of those seem to be important enough to be mentioned:

- The dilemma of "general" and "specific"

  It was the desire to have tools at the end of the project which are easily applicable in all kind of learning situations in the realm of intercultural teaching competences. Therefore it was necessary to find out to which degree those tools are context-bound and what happens when they are applied in a different

teaching-learning situation. By doing so it became very clear to the group that the uncovering of implicit cultural orientations is inevitable and needs to be dealt with. No matter how much one tries to evoke a given "common ground" of orientation: When it comes to practical work the task of aligning, inquiring, comparing and understanding needs to be accomplished. The "general" as a quality is the result of original and fresh communicative endeavours.

- The dilemma of result orientation and thoroughness

  Given the time and budget restrictions it was necessary to frequently deal with the conflict of pace in the progress and the needed meticulous quality of the tools. The group tried to solve this dilemma by putting in extra work loads in between the project meetings. The aspiration level with reference to the precise or pragmatic formulation of the tools was an issue repetitively.

- The dilemma of "conceptual" and "experiential"

  This ambivalence is well known to most of the teachers in all countries. Here it became evident that the issue of "culture" can't be dealt with without getting personal and intimate to a degree which is normally not applicable in the working environment among adults. As "culture" as a collective framework is mostly effective by implicit knowledge the teaching/learning around questions of cultural orientation calls for an explicit turn. This makes the participating people visible and creates an unforeseen degree of disclosure. Therefore the learning situation becomes more or less experiential even without any didactic manoeuvres.

  This was, of course the case within the Tickle project as well. As the project was constructed in such a way that the project meetings were held in the home locations of the cooperating institutions the group members exposed themselves to experientially significant encounters. This first-hand and on-site learning arrangement created impressive and sometimes moving situations of direct experience which called for lengthy phases of intellectual and emotional digestion.

  The group members willingly exposed themselves to such intense situations and then used the meals and leisure time for processing and debriefing. This permanent communication in varying subgroups, pairs and even in the plenary contributed significantly to the mastering of this dilemma. So it was possible to use the first-hand impressions for the conceptual working steps later on. There it became clear that intercultural competencies can't be developed without a strong experiential character of the learning arrangements, an insight which helped to select and reselect the array of tools.

5. Conclusion

To a consultants mind and from a bird's eye view the Tickle project was very much characterized by intensive work and the interlocking of several logics : The

experiential qualities, the frequently necessary invention of new working procedures, the strong result orientation and the endless complexity of the subject matter were not manageable without a very high devotion of the participants. Fortunately there were many intellectual and conceptual resources represented within the group. The main task of the consultant was to get this expertise to the surface and effective. The group members in their enthusiasm and genuine desire for learning and innovating made that task comparatively easy.