

INTERCULTURAL COACHING IN EDUCATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Based on coaching and educational experiences with Latvian and German students, the importance and characteristics of intercultural training and coaching may be demonstrated. Besides targeting to an increase of intercultural sensibility for a group of participants, intercultural coaching focuses on accompanying the individual's specific processes and provides support to the individual working internationally. As such intercultural coaching focuses strongly on the requirements of the targeted group and cannot be standardized. Each and every situation and interaction has its own individual context and history. International coaching should therefore be part of a target or specific goal oriented agreement which acts as the basis of a relationship between coach and client; thus, the coach has the task to analyze the spontaneous dynamics, the meanings and the consequences of the new situation. The research describes theoretical aspects of and practical experience with intercultural coaching concerning educational situations and contexts (communication, learning, teaching, counseling), following the different aspects of intercultural coaching in educational situations (language, history, mentality).

Key words: coaching, education, intercultural, process.

Introduction

The research describes the main aspects of intercultural coaching and illustrates them using practical experiences (seminar).

The background of the research is the educational work with students in Latvia and Germany who prepare for educational purposes (teacher, counselor) in abroad (Germany or other countries) and need assistance to develop their competences.

Methodically the research is based on the humanistic and biographical educational and counseling approach, which considers human behaviour as a biographical construction by autonomous reflecting individuals who share similar experiences in a creative way.

The coaching model used in this research is the approach to assist people in a holistic way to:

- release their potential in order to maximize their effectiveness and achieve their goals
- identify pragmatic solutions to their various daily challenges
- help themselves and learn, rather than provide prescriptive standard solutions.

In the coaching contract between the coach and coachee the coach provides the process (the form and structure of a coaching event) and the coachee provides the content (the

subject matter they wish to discuss and explore) (Griffin/Cook, 2008). Therefore, this coaching model is characterized by process and result-/goal-orientation and is focused between the identification of goals (process) and their realization (result). Because the special characteristics of intercultural coaching are based on the coachee's intercultural context, the research analyzes the role of this context (concerning language, history and mentality) and illustrates it with the example of a course for international students. Behavior is culturally dependent, and therefore it is important for both groups to improve their intercultural competence by using the different aspects of intercultural coaching in educational contexts.

In order to realize this main purpose of the research (to demonstrate how intercultural competence can be improved by biographical oriented coaching), the focus is on the different aspects of intercultural coaching concerning educational contexts (*intercultural, coaching* and *educational* aspect) and on their practical realization in a seminar.

Theoretical Aspects

Interculturality as frame

Intercultural coaches consider the coachee's cultural perspective, as well as the perspective of the people around him/her; and therefore, focus primarily on the individual and his/her options for taking action within a special cultural frame as the scenic background and the variable overall context, where the interactions of the involved persons take place. Facilitating an 'intercultural climate' (Griffin/Cook, 2008) provides individuals with the capability to act efficiently within an intercultural context and in international work situations. Thus these individuals become more culturally aware and adapt their behavior and expectations as appropriate in their own (business) situations. Therefore, intercultural coaching can be defined as a culture oriented force of change to unleash the coachee's intercultural potential/competence (Rosinski and Abbott, 2006). Because people instinctively approach situations with their own 'worldview' (i.e. personal and cultural perspective), it is important to be aware of the various worldviews that are in play during the coaching process. Therefore, awareness of one's own and of other identities and attitudes is important (Friedman, 1994; Gaston, 1984; Kohls/Knight, 1994; Kohls, 1985).

The international context of both coach and coachee is both a chance and a challenge for coaching and educational purposes, because it has to do with the different aspects of culture: language (as different models of interpretation), history (as different models of socialization) and mentality (as different models of attitude and behavior).

Demonstrated by coaching experiences with Latvian and German students these aspects mean that people, who speak in a very unknown language (only about 2, 5 Million Latvian mother tongue- speakers-(even fewer considering that the Russians are not mother tongue speakers!)) are depending on learning foreign languages and nevertheless are very interested in using their own language as a kind of identification marker and common identity. On the other hand for German students their own language seems not sufficient for international purposes. Therefore, both partners meet in the need for a common language (English) but also are interested in the culture behind other languages. These cultural backgrounds are influenced by historical events and experiences. Maintained through family traditions Latvian students are confronted with past experiences that are not really their own including German and Russian occupations and their consequences (exile, deportation, communist Regime). Such socialization heavily influences the student's definition of his/her own individual and national identity.

For German students, too, their Western (US-) socialization and the family tradition of being a victim of war influences their search for their own identity. Therefore, both partners

have common experiences with (Post-) War- Traumata of their families and have to cope with the impacts of modern (global, capitalist/post- soviet) society.

Influenced by language and historical background the self-consciousness of Latvian and German students may differ in details, but on the whole are similar in their Western orientation and in the aim of living their lives without (systematic) coping with family traditions and -traumata. Therefore, not only such worldviews of the coachee need to be taken into account during the coaching process but also the worldview of the coach has to be observed concerning these aspects, because worldviews can clash. One of the challenges for intercultural coaches is trying to balance the different worldviews in a respectful way. Although Latvian and German students are young persons, they might have experienced turning points in their lives, and their learning biographies; such experiences thus can be examined as markers in their life-stories. They relate knowledge and skills for coping with problems in life by building a sense of community within the framework of this “subjective culture” formed by past experiences, learning and socialization and integrated in the framework of an organizational (or national) culture. Intercultural coaching is a way to cope and to work with such (individual or group) experiences and to build up new (common) frameworks.

Coaching as a process

Intercultural coaches are confronted with the challenges of language, history and mentality and should therefore be aware of whose worldview is in play at any one time (‘intercultural understanding’) in an internal (biographical) and external (organizational) sense. Intercultural coaching takes into account the different worldviews, needs values and expectations that people from different cultural backgrounds can bring to the coaching process by interpretation, socialization and attitudes. In an intercultural coaching session it is important for the coach and the coachee to consider the different worldviews and the various stages of the coaching process by direct/open communication and interaction, transparency of emotions in communication, of status and respect issues in the process (like recognizing time, deadlines and priorities), in order to become aware of influences from national, personal and corporate culture in an empathic and authentic way (Griffin/Cook, 2008). Coaching helps make this process of consideration and reflection systematic and sustainable through transparency, flexibility and empathy (Rogers, 1969). Because adults learn by implemented models of interpretation they have to become aware of unknown and surprising aspects in usual situations (Hauser, 2003).

Another important coaching task is to provide opportunities for coachees to apply concepts and input to his/her own cultural situation. Coaching needs an agreement to be open and transparent when working with coachees from other cultural backgrounds. In order to find a method of working with the coachee it is important to be empathetic to feedback from coachees. Therefore, showing how a certain concept is implemented in the coach’s culture, and discussing the possible differences either in concept or implementation, is helpful in order to develop more culturally appropriate ways for the concept to be introduced. Such a way of coaching identifies and develops intercultural competence as a key to success in the international and globalized work environment. Combined with training exercises it fosters intercultural competence.

Coaching has to be distinguished from counseling, training and therapy but without a doubt integrates some of these aspects: Counseling (and supervision) are process-oriented invitations to share problems and possible solutions. Training intends to exercise and anchor these solutions. Therapy primary is interest in the causes of problems. Coaching combines analyzing, considering and exercising an orientation to the client’s needs and is therefore process- and goal oriented. Therefore, the coach becomes a facilitator to the coachee’s process

of self-actualization by the use of reflective procedures and by mutual trust and acceptance. He/she is a specialist for process and respect, however, no specialist for results and solutions. The process continuously oscillates between the internal experience of the client and the requirements brought to him from the outside, linked together by experiences (Rogers, 1969).

Education as main focus

Intercultural coaching is a kind of education and therefore appropriate to educational contexts (Bundeszentrale, 1998; Flechsig, 1995; Hauser, 2003; Seelye, 1996; Steixner, 2007).

As in any other educational context optimizing the coachee's (intercultural) competence is the point of focus. The purpose of intercultural coaching can be characterized as acquiring skills and strategies for coping with inter- and multicultural situations and challenges. These competences - like other educational contexts - have cognitive, affective and pragmatic aspects. Therefore, it is important to conceive a multidimensional and ever - changing model of support for intercultural competence, in which trainings, as well as coaching units, alternate with each other. Intercultural coaching can be pursued either in a direct (=focus on training) and/or an indirect form (=focus on supervision/counseling).

Direct:

Intercultural trainings foster intercultural competence or sensitivity by developing the ability of an individual to grasp and identify intercultural conditions and factors through different methods of perception, thinking, judgment, feeling and action that influence culturally foreign people.

Indirect:

Intercultural counseling facilitates the cultural development of identity (Ward, 2001) and helps to identify cultural differences (Thomas, 1993; Steixner, 2007). Like an educator the intercultural coach should be able to listen carefully, to be aware and to give feedback. Combined with an intercultural training (theoretical input, single,- group or standardized) the coachee can learn to act in an appropriate way or in a holistic way and develop his/her own coping strategies and competencies through an individual process and through the integration of experiences (Thomas et al., 2003; Schmidt, 2003).

Practical Experiences

In the seminar "Working with groups in a foreign culture" Latvian and German students learn to train their intercultural competences and to use them in foreign contexts

Based on the awareness of their own and other biographies they learn to recognize the reasons, conditions and consequences of human behavior in educational situations.

Following the biographical model of the course the focus is on sharing experiences and integrating aspects of the past (history), the present (language) and the future time (mentality) in one's dealings with life or new contacts.

As intercultural coaching it has a comparative structure and integrates individual and social aspects; as intercultural coaching it has a holistic program and integrates process orientation and intentional learning, cognitive, emotional and social skills.

The seminar consists of six modules:

1. Module: "I" (Me and Myself) as a biography construction

Theoretical background:

On the basis of self-awareness the students learn about Latvian and German biographies and their construction by language, history, mentality. They identify the differences,

and reconsider whether a language is used as the mother tongue or a foreign language. They recognize the function of certain grammatical characteristics of a language for communication (articles, open or closed questions, metaphoric or ironic styles, etc.). They also consider the influence of familiar experiences and socialization on actual attitudes (Occupation and mistrust - Americanization and profit-orientation) and about the interdependencies between individual attitudes and social impacts (less self-confidence - social exclusion).

Practice exercises:

Following this theoretical background the students become aware of their own intercultural resources and improve them in language (by non-aggressive asking, answering, presenting, arguing), in history (by integrating important events in their personal biography) and in mentality (by reflecting about their attitudes (making tests, sharing feedback))

Evaluation and fixing:

In order to make these experiences sustainable the students find ways for documentation (essay, presentation, creative work).

This is the structure of every module which is modified in certain aspects according to the topic.

2. Module: The group as a biography collection

Theoretical background:

On the basis of self-awareness the students learn about Latvian and German group-characteristics and their reasons/conditions in language (singular - usual) history (often occupied - NS-Trauma) and mentality (national - personal pride).

Similar to module 1 they recognize the function of certain literary characteristics for group-building and common self-confidence ("Dainas" (=Past collective folklore as wisdom) - great poets or philosophers) and consider the influence of familiar experiences and socialization on actual (present-day) attitudes of peer groups and organizations (soviet or US- influence) and about the interdependencies between individual attitudes and social impacts (an including, accepting or an excluding, rejecting attitude of groups),

Practice exercises:

Following this theoretical background the students become aware of their own intercultural resources as a group and improve them in language (by correct discussing and conflict management), in history (by integrating important events in their personal biographies) and in mentality (by reflecting about their attitudes (making tests, sharing feedback)).

Evaluation and Anchoring:

In order to make these experiences sustainable the students find ways for documentation (essay, presentation, creative work).

These basic issues and experiences are strengthened and exercised in the following modules (3-6) concerning the aspects of communication (3), learning and teaching (4), counseling (5) and evaluation (6).

According to the methodical (holistic) and systematic (biographical) background of the course communication is seen as an individual and social encounter of biographies with the dialectic relation between contents and methods). Learning and teaching is characterized by the exchange of biographical elements, counseling is characterized by sharing these elements and by facilitating to accept one's own biography. Evaluation as the end of an educational process is characterized by certain rituals based on biographical experiences.

Discussion

Intercultural coaching is characterized by the chance and challenge that people from different cultural backgrounds can bring to the coaching process different worldviews, needs,

values and expectations (Casse 1981; Fowler & Mumfort, 1995; Landis, 2003). The example of German and Latvian Students shows how important it is to keep in mind that there are potentially at least two worldviews present. Therefore considering the different worldviews, their impact on the various stages of the coaching process, and the changes in the coaching style influenced by them, it is crucial to manage the coaching process in a non-judgmental, sensitive way. Thus it is especially helpful to consider the verbal and nonverbal communication and interaction style, the role of emotions, flexibility, priorities and of respect issues in the process. (Griffin/Cook, 2008).

Intercultural competence shows cognitive, affective and pragmatic aspects (Barmeyer, 2002) and can be characterized as the core element of strategic, social and disciplinary competence (Bolten, 2002). Therefore, different models of coaching can be found (with the main focus either on training or on reflecting). Nevertheless, any model of intercultural coaching develops peoples' competency and allows them to enter a cross-cultural situation with increased awareness, more cultural sensitivity and therefore more self-confidence in interaction (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Besides, intercultural coaching not only uses the coaching process, but also increases awareness of cultural factors, such as national characteristics, national values and norms, different perceptions/worldviews, and different styles of interacting. The coach thus becomes a guide, who supports the clients, until the clients feel confident and comfortable enough in cross-cultural encounters to proceed by themselves. Through intercultural coaching people can become integrated persons who understand that his/her identity emerges from the act of defining identity itself. This self-reflective loop shows identity to be one act of constructing reality, similar to other acts that together yield concepts and cultures. By being conscious of this dynamic process, people can function in relationship to cultures while staying outside the constraints of a particular one (Bennett, 1993 (and 2005)).

Conclusions

Similar to education coaching assists people to reach their goals in a systematic way. Therefore, coaching integrates educational aspects but in a different way: While education focuses on knowledge, the focus in coaching is on skills and attitudes. These common aspects and differences also can be noticed in an intercultural context: While intercultural education facilitates common experiences with foreign worldviews and attitudes, intercultural coaching assists people to cope with such challenges and to take them as a chance. This means:

- Different cultures in language, history and mentality build up a framework for educational and other settings that foster or hinder successful communication and learning, and therefore have to be considered carefully by biographical work.
- Education, counseling and training are important aspects of coaching that should be integrated into a process of developing awareness and competences (self-actualization).
- An atmosphere of acceptance and challenge is an important setting and frame, especially for the development of intercultural competences.

Following the process of biographical and educational coaching, intercultural encounters can become a kind of instrument for "cultivating humanity" (Nussbaum, 1997).

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