In the Name of Identity:

Teaching cultural awareness in the intercultural classroom

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Abstract

The paper presents a purely pedagogical application of Amin Maalouf's "identity check-up" as a tool which has proved to be useful in cultural mixed classes as a basis for self-analysis and discussion, and as a means of preventing the development of stereotypes and prejudices.

Keywords: Identity, cultural identity, self-analysis, intercultural communication, international classroom, pedagogical approach

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Introduction

Etymologically seen the notion "identity" stems from the Latin word "idem" which means "one and the same". The so-called ego identity (Erikson 1959, sometimes identified simply as "the self") is part of a group identity. Many conflicts of today and in the recent past are based on what people assume to be their identity, be it their ethnic, religious or cultural identity. Some proponents of "cultural identity" try to establish distinct borders between cultures and above all to look for what separates different cultural groups from each other.

This paper is not meant to present a discussion of various theoretical notions of identity. I will rather focus on a pedagogical concept for discussing cultural identity within the intercultural classroom. The concept of identity presented here, is taken from the writing works of the French writer Maalouf who shows a concept of identity which contradicts to some extent the notion of "ONE self". When I talk about cultural identity, I mean the whole sum of characteristics given by place, gender, age, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, religious orientation, ethnicity and above all the blanks between all these, allowing people to be part of one and another culture at the same time, all depending on context or sometimes even on free choice.

During my courses of intercultural communication I usually discuss with the students the approaches of intercultural researchers such as Hofstede, Hall and Trompenaars and the cultural standards concept of the German psychologist Alexander Thomas. The theories of all these researchers contain findings about concrete cultures within welldefined national borders.

"As cultural standards we understand all kinds of perceiving, thinking, judging, and acting that in a given culture by the vast majority of individuals are considered for themselves and others as normal, self-evident, typical and obligatory. Cultural standards regulate behaviour und guide individuals to assess observed behaviour." (Thomas 1993) Even though Alexander Thomas' definition of cultural standards is a very cautious one which tries to avoid stereotypes, the question still is: How can we establish the borders of a "given culture"?

Are there really distinct cultural borders between nations? Is it possible to set up cultural borders in terms of geography? Catalans and Basques divided by the border between France and Spain? Or in terms of history: Were there two German cultures up to the year 1989? Or in terms of specific regions: In Germany a Bavarian has not much in common with a Frisian – not even the language. Or are the really important cultural borders set by subcultures? For sure former German foreign secretary Joschka Fischer

has more in common with his colleague from the Green Party Cem Özdemir who has Turkish roots, than with a farmer from Hessia, the region where Fischer comes from. The cultural borders between nations are very difficult to define. Accordingly the definition of cultural identity is just as difficult - the notion must remain rather vague. It is also quite probable that a young German knows about national-socialism and the misery Germans have brought over Europe in the past. It is quite probable that he has been confronted with a distinct sense of order and discipline. Both aspects are part of his "cultural heritage". Whether he takes it in and makes it part of his personality depends on a lot of other influences (among others education in school and in the family) and, last but not least, his own decision.

I found that only presenting the views of the intercultural researchers involves the risk that students retain precisely these short given characteristics of "national characters" and consequently the only result of the classes of intercultural communication will be another set of stereotypes. Therefore I've been looking for a way to put this in perspective again. I want the students to be aware of the very complex relations between culture, cultural heritage and the individual and to find out that cultural standards can never be simply applied to individuals. I want them to be aware of the fact there are many more elements that shape an individual.

The wonderful book, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* by Amin Maalouf showed me a way out of the dilemma. Maalouf himself is a perfect example of the kind of globalised personalities we increasingly find in Europe and as a matter of fact all over the world. In his book Maalouf starts his argument by emphasising the very basic human need to belong somewhere, to a group, to a family, a tribe, or a nation. However, he also emphasises the fact that we belong to many groups AT THE SAME TIME.
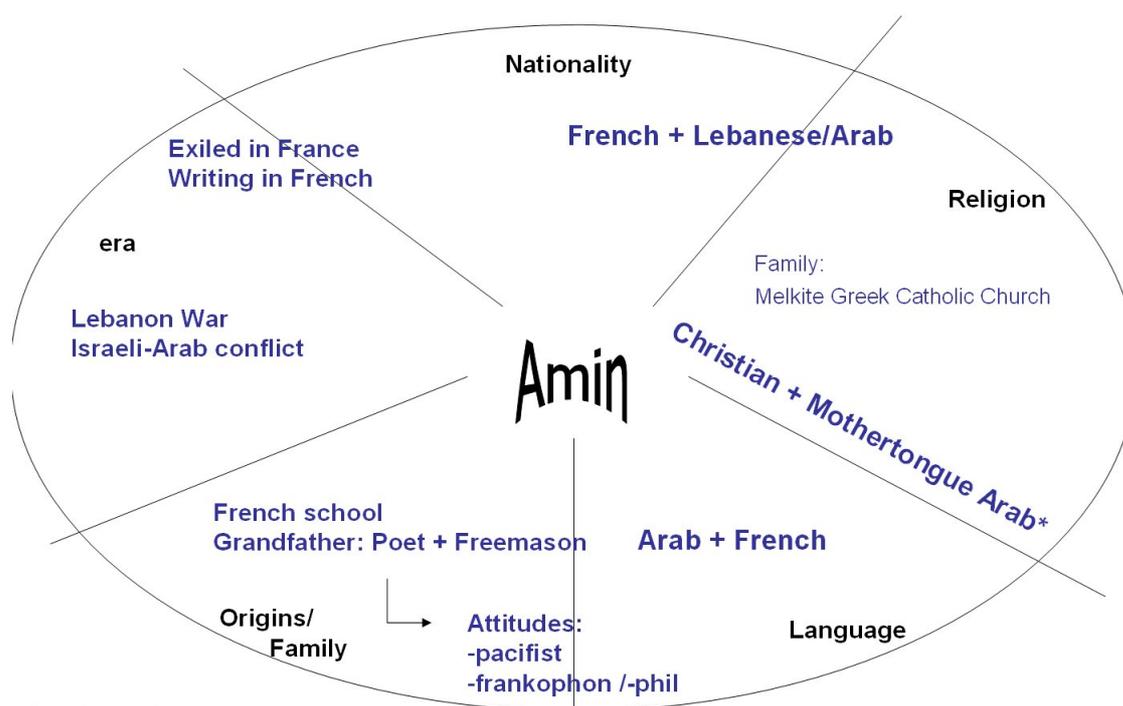

Fig.1

Maalouf is a Lebanese author, born 1949 in Beirut. His parents' families came from a Lebanese mountain village. His mother grew up in Cairo and was the child of a Maronite father from that village who had left to work in Egypt, and a mother born in Turkey. Amin's father belonged to the Melkite Greek Catholic community. One of his ancestors was a priest whose son converted to become a Presbyterian parson. The parson's son (Maalouf's grandfather) was a "rationalist, anticlerical, probably a freemason, and refused to baptise his children". While the Protestant branch of the family sent their children to British or American schools, Maalouf's mother was a staunch Catholic who insisted on sending her son to a French Jesuit school. Following Maalouf's biography we can see a high diversity in terms of nation, region, religion, philosophical background.

Maalouf's argument against conflicts and wars in the name of identity is based on his own personal biography. He tries to prove that each person has a large number of affinities – an individual belongs to one group and at the same time to another. Concerning one and the same person we can find elements that separate him or her from some people or, inversely, link him or her with others. Such conglomerate of cultural allegiances and affinities, people of different backgrounds and languages in the biography of a single person is true for many people in today's world.

In order to be aware of all these affinities and experiences that have shaped an individual in the past Maalouf recommends an "Examen d'identité" – an "Identity check-up" (see Fig. 2). This might be understood as a description of a person's "individuation process": He himself is Arab, a trait he shares with about 300 millions of other people. He was born in Lebanon, which reduces the number of people with the same background to about 4 million. He is a Christian Arab from Lebanon, which means again a reduction to about 1.5 million. He lives in France and writes his books and articles in French, which again reduces the number of people with whom he has some kind of affiliations. But the fact that Arab is his mother tongue facilitates his access to Muslims all over the world. The common intersection with groups he belongs to scales down. The intersection between him and the groups he shares something with gets ever narrower, till, in the end, only he himself is left. In this way he defines "identity".

Taking Maalouf as an example I recommend an "Identity Check-up" to my students.

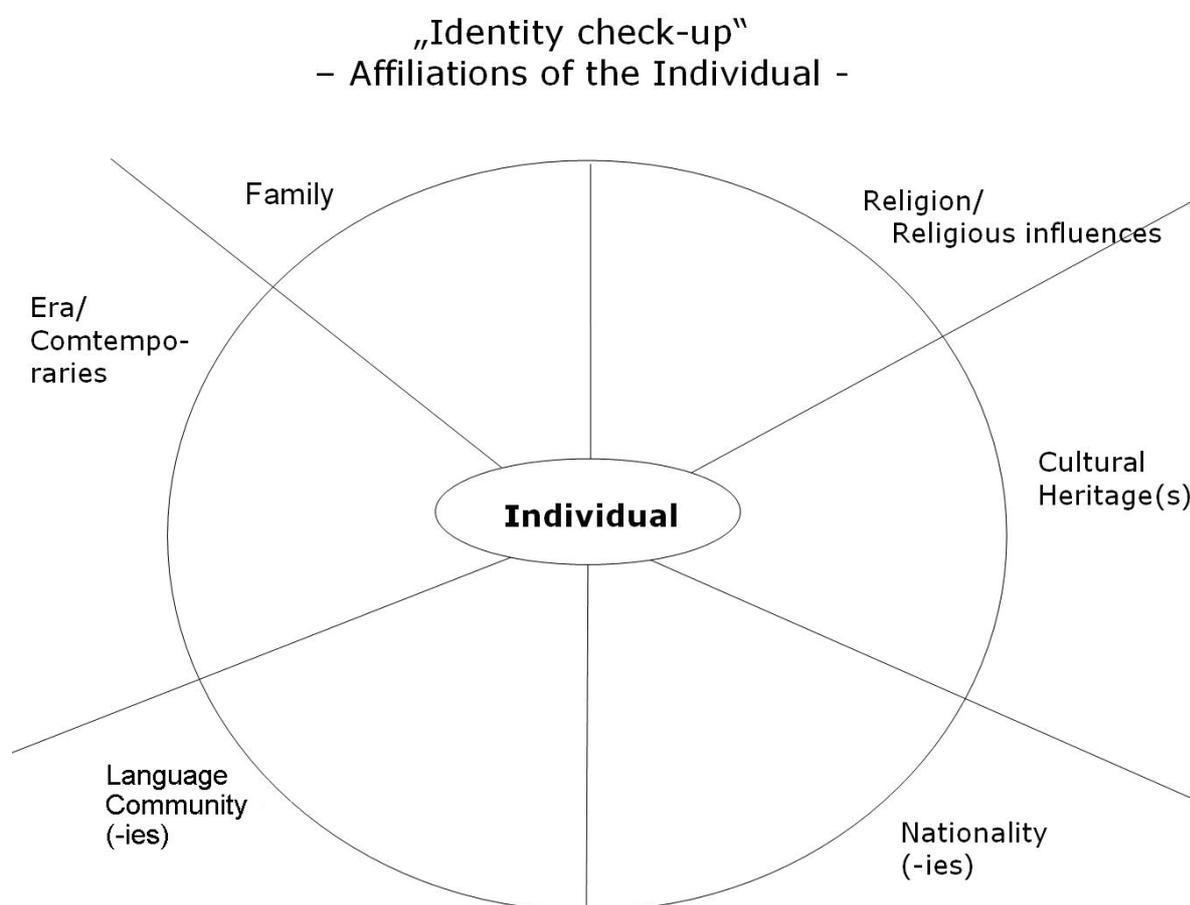„Identity check-up"
– Affiliations of the Individual -

Fig. 2

This is an approach by which I hope to bring into perspective all the stereotyped ideas of a national or ethnic affiliation. Many of our students, German students, international students as well as German students with an immigration background have a complex biography. Intercultural learning has a lot to do with learning about oneself. Understanding foreign cultures requires awareness of one's own cultural roots and the role of culture in one's own life. In order to make the students find out more about themselves and their backgrounds they fill in their personal data – an activity that requires a lot of thinking!

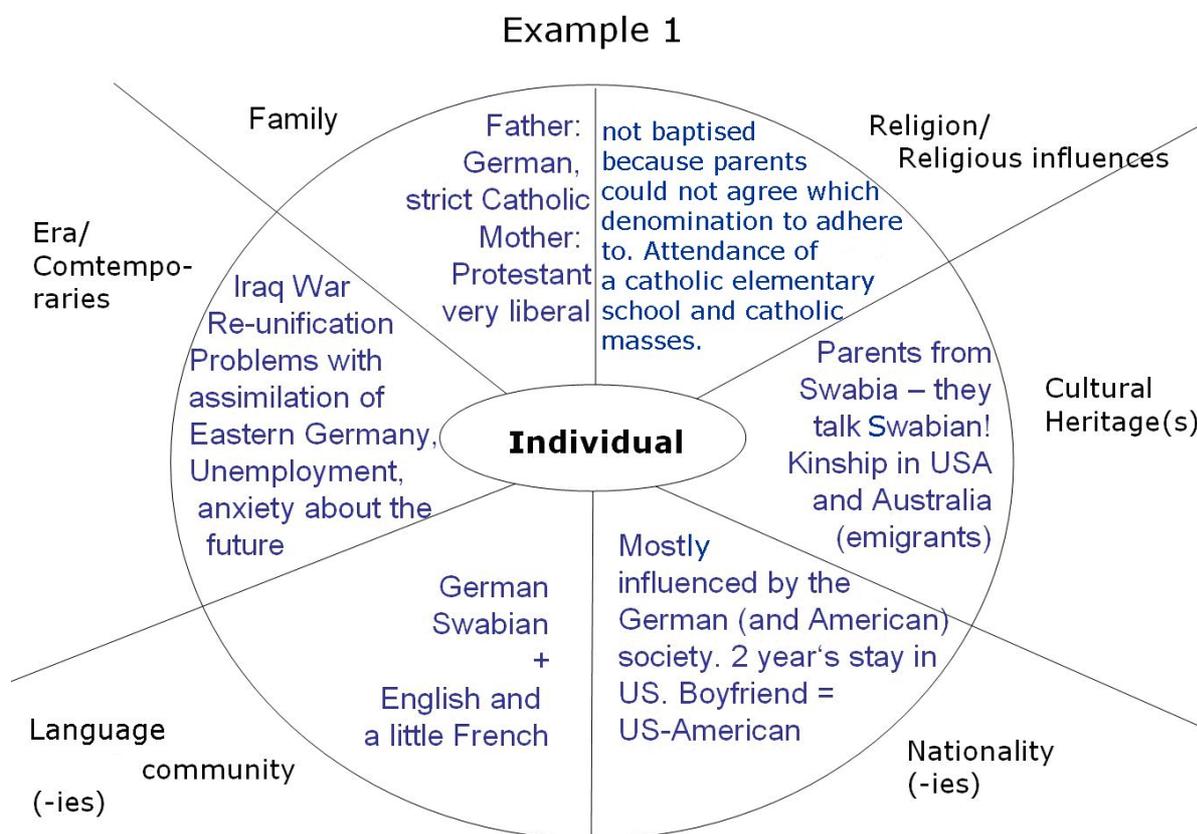Here are some examples of students' "identity check-ups":

Example 1

Fig. 3

The father of this student is a strict Catholic, while her mother is a Protestant and very liberal. She is not baptised because the parents couldn't agree on the religion of the child. Nevertheless, she attended a catholic school and catholic masses. Her parents come from Swabia and talk Swabian, which is quite relevant for her since she was born in Cologne and has lived there all here life. In Cologne, people talk a dialect which is very different from Swabian, so she very soon had to feel at home in both languages. A part of her family has emigrated to Australia and the USA. She feels most influenced by the German and the American society. America - because she spent two years in the US and she has an American boyfriend. She feels influenced by political events, above all by the war in Iraq, Germany's re-unification with all its problems, the unemployment rate. Moreover, she is rather anxious about the future.

Example 2

Family

Egypt, Algeria
(Algerian,
Berber),Silesia
GDR, Kuba,
Germany

Islamic
Atheistic
Greek-orthodox(Syria)
Catholic

Religion/
Religious influences

Era/
Comtempo-
raries

Socialism
Communism
Democracy

Individual

Arab music,
Food and
Language
**Christmas
& Ramadan**

Cultural
Heritage(s)

French
Arab
German (saxon dialect)
kabyle

Arab,
German
Islamic
Patriarchal
liberal

Language
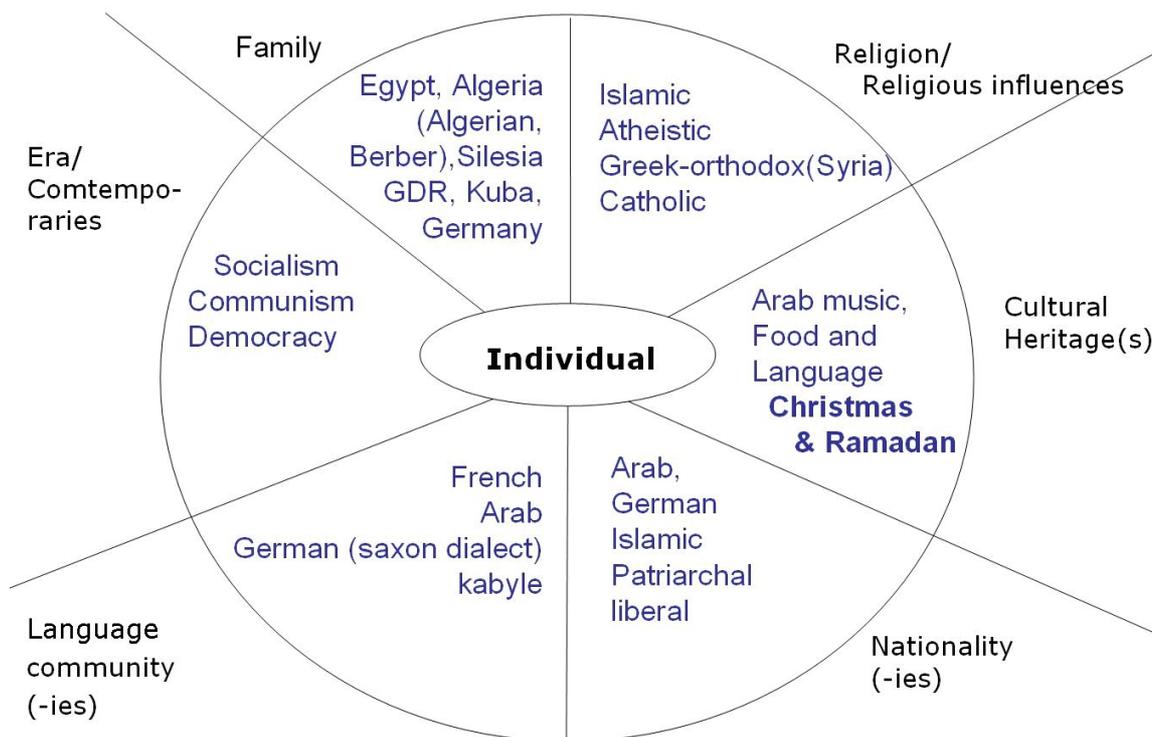community
(-ies)

Nationality
(-ies)

Fig. 4

This student's identity check shows a background as dazzling as Maalouf's. Her roots are in northern Africa, Egypt, Algeria, where the Berber come from, but also in Eastern Germany and Cuba. These various sources result in a mixture of religious influences, from atheism to Islam, Greek-orthodoxy and Catholicism. Consequently Christmas AND Ramadan are important to her. She experienced socialism/communism AND democracy. She is a perfect example of a transcultural personality.

Example 3

Family

Father's
familiy: farmers
Mother's family:
from GDR
Living together
with grand-
parents

Catholic
altar server

Religion/
Religious influences

Era/
Comtempo-
raries

Democracy

Individual

Rural,
near the frontier
to NL
brass music club
dancing chorus

Cultural
Heritage(s)

German
Low-German
Dutch

Part of village
community
Part of rural
associations

German

Language
Community
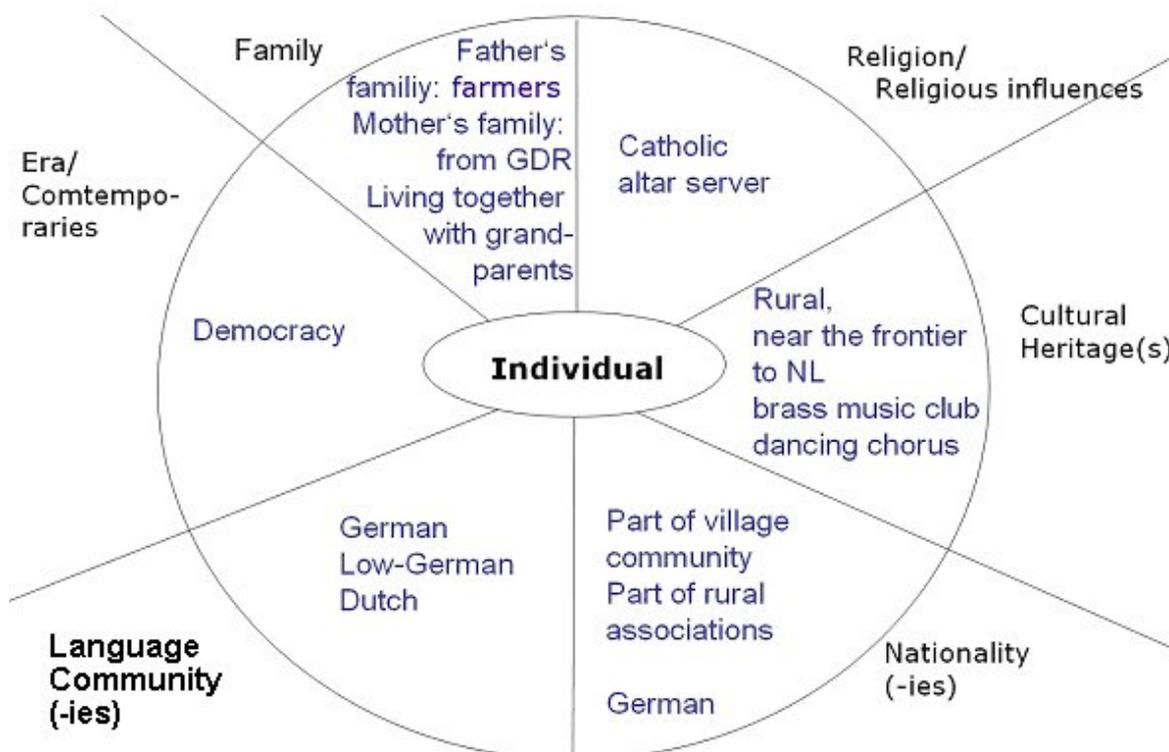(-ies)

Nationality
(-ies)

Fig. 5

The father's family of this student are farmers; his mother originates from the former German Democratic Republic. What is really rare in Germany is the fact that being a young person he lives in an extended family together with his grand-parents. His cultural roots lie in the rural area near the Dutch border, in the village brass music club and the dancing chorus. Consequently, he feels affiliated to his village and region and his German nationality only ranks third. His languages are German, low-German and Dutch and the contemporary influence that seems most important to him is democracy.

These few examples contain information about highly different students with highly different backgrounds and highly different experiences even in this early stage in their lives.

Out of 45 students questioned there were only 17 "purely" German. The remaining two thirds came from all over the world, including the Netherlands, Italy, France, Nicaragua, former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Belarus, Hungary, Argentina, Poland, Russia, Northern Africa, Norway, Jamaica, and Austria. This shows to what extend Germany has become a mixed society these days. And apparently "purely German" students found themselves subject to very diverse influences. Maybe their grandparents had to leave the former eastern territories of Germany after the war, probably their grand-parents were adherents of the Nazis, or maybe they are children of the so-called 68-generation, which might be the reason why religion doesn't play a big role in their lives any more – this list could be continued.

Filling in the form the students could develop an increased awareness of their diverse roots and this proved to them how important the influence of language, family, origins, religion is for the person they are today. For instance, the huge influence of rural life on the student quoted before: He found out that his personal experience is not simply normal – as it seemed to him before – but makes him different from other German students on the one hand but offers a common ground with foreign students from a rural area on the other hand. And this finding is a most valuable one: It shows to the students the unexpected potential of connecting with people all over the world and the chance of tying networks instead of defining borders.

During the debriefing session a discussion could take place about questions like:

- Which part of my experience could be useful for connecting with people from a different background and make communication easier?

And more general questions such as:

Is it worthwhile to fight for the preservation of one's cultural heritage (e.g. some Germans language opposing so-called "Denglisch", Indians wanting to maintain their own methods of producing things; Icelanders fighting for the relocation of streets to prevent disturbing the elves that dwell in rock formations)

Summary

This classroom activity allows for a highly integrative notion of culture, from where the SELF can be seen as the centre of a huge network, aware of its roots and defining himself as the "gossamer"- with links to individuals from other cultural contexts (cf. "webs of significance", Clifford Geertz 1977). It shows that "identity" in the sense of "one and the same" is only true if we admit that identity is not cast in iron, that identity construction takes a whole life-time and assimilates all kinds of life-experiences. This way I hope that the teaching of cultural standards may stop pigeonhole thinking and avoid establishing further stereotypes.

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