

In the name of identity: Teaching cultural awareness in the intercultural classroom

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Being part of a group – be it a cultural, religious or national one – what does it mean? Why do we want to be part of a community, although this very often leads to fear of others and to all kinds of aggression? “Identity” – what is this?

Amin Maalouf, Lebanese by birth, Christian by religion, writing in French and from a position of multiple identities (“I am posed between two countries, two or three languages, and several cultural traditions”), tries to show that the common notion of “identity” is false – and dangerous. He shows that identity is not stable and defined by belonging to one group or another. He suggests a way that might help accepting a multiplicity of equally legitimate allegiances. Maalouf’s “identity check-up” is an effective way for analysing one’s own identity and has proven to be useful in culturally mixed classes as a basis for self-analysis and discussion. Many students in countries like Germany, with a high number of immigrants, have experienced the influence of different cultures, religions, societies and are open for a notion of “identity” as a kind of a dynamic puzzle.

The paper will show how this “examen d’identité” can be used in the classroom and compare and discuss the results of these identity check-ups, filled-in by the students.

Key words: *identity, cultural identity, self-analysis, intercultural communication, international classroom, pedagogical approach*

A couple of weeks ago in a small East German town:

A rural festivity including a fair, a shooting competition, dancing and lots of beer.

Eight citizens of Indian origin, residents in the small town for 2 years, take part in the dancing. By the end of the evening three of them are seriously injured, the others still in shock. What had happened? Some young Germans had started a manhunt; they had felt that these coloured guys didn’t belong to them, that they were aliens in this type

of activity, in this type of rural area. We are we, and they are not part of us.

Many conflicts of today and the recent past are based on what people assume to be their identity, be it their ethnic, religious or cultural identity. Some fighters for “cultural identity” overemphasise the borders between cultures and above all look for what separates different cultures from each other.

In my paper, I’ll focus on a pedagogical concept for discussing identity within the

intercultural classroom. 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 gaps (blanks) between all these, allowing people to be part of one and another at the same time.

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 concept of cultural standards of the German psychologist Alexander Thomas. The theories of all these researchers contain findings about concrete cultures, for instance: “The Germans tend to be very direct in their communication”, “the French prefer implicit communication, so do the British” and so on. I found that there is a danger that students retain precisely these short characteristics and that 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 find out that cultural standards should not be turned into something absolute and should not simply be 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.

He 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.

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 indi-

Examen d'identité (Amin Maalouf):

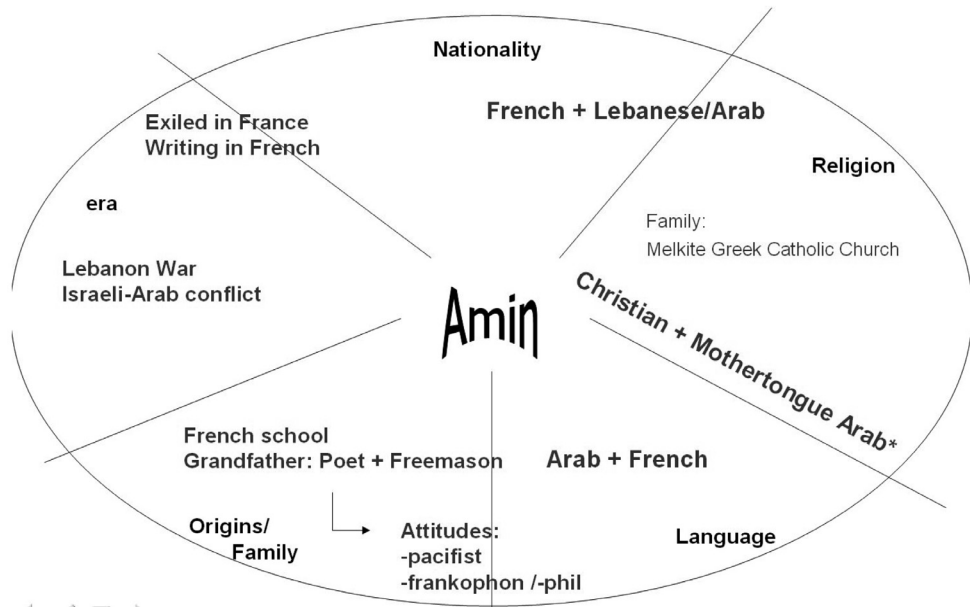


Fig. 1

vidual 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 mill. He is a Christian Arab from Lebanon, which means again a reduction to about 1.5 mill. 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.

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 culture and the role of culture in one’s own life. In order to make the students find out more

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

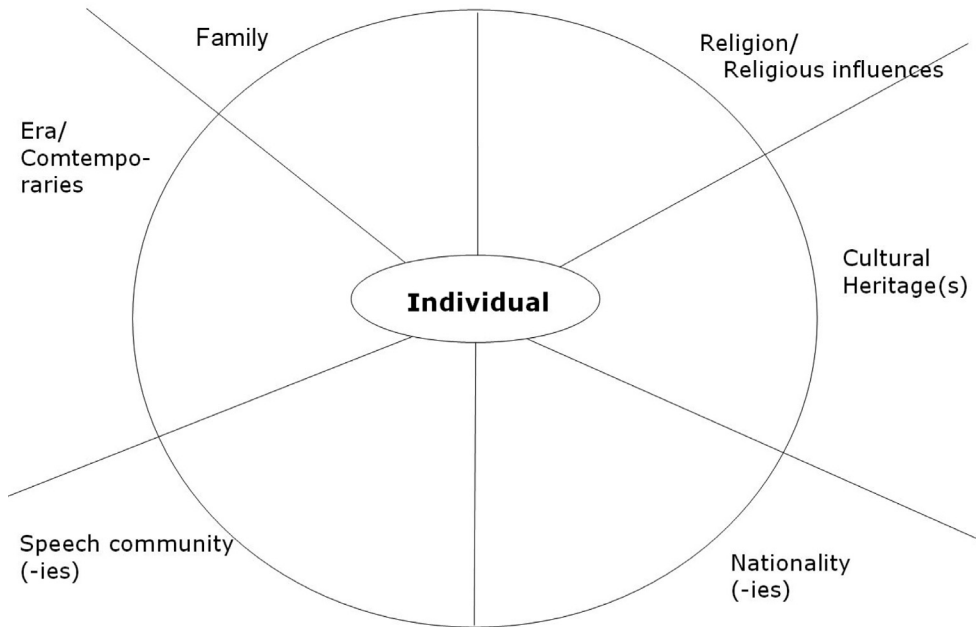


Fig. 2

about themselves and their cultural backgrounds, they fill in their personal data.

Here are some examples of students' papers:

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 her 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. Part of her family 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 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.

This student's identity check shows a similarly dazzling background as Amin 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 atheistic to Islamic, Greek-Orthodox and Cath-

Example 1

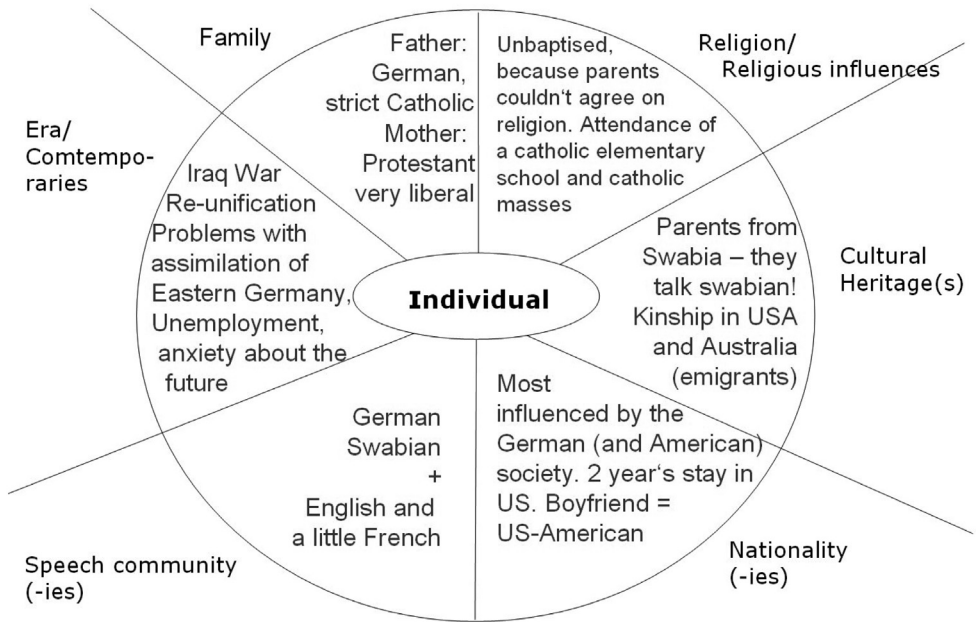


Fig. 3

Example 2

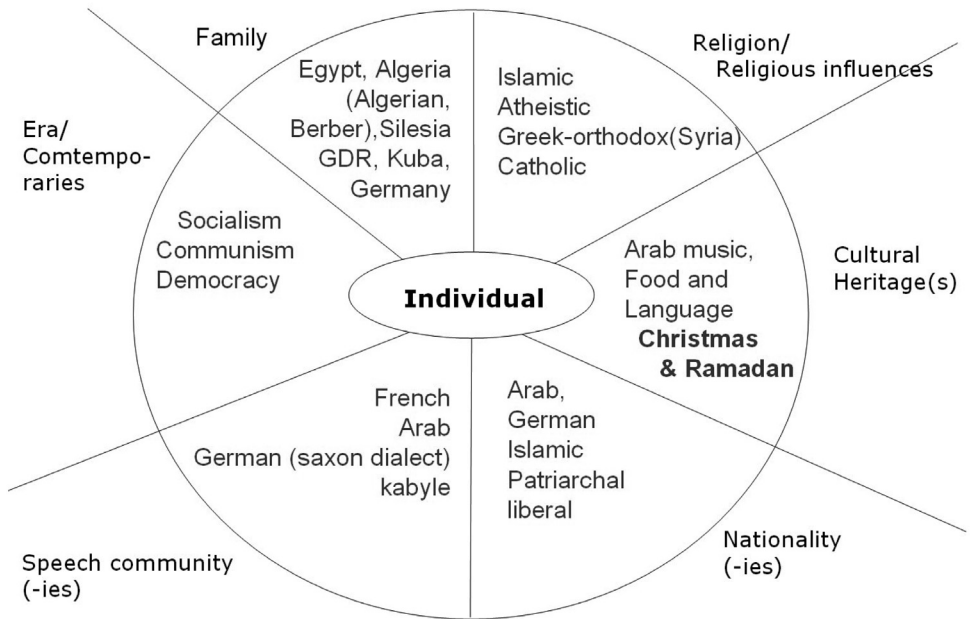


Fig. 4

Example 3

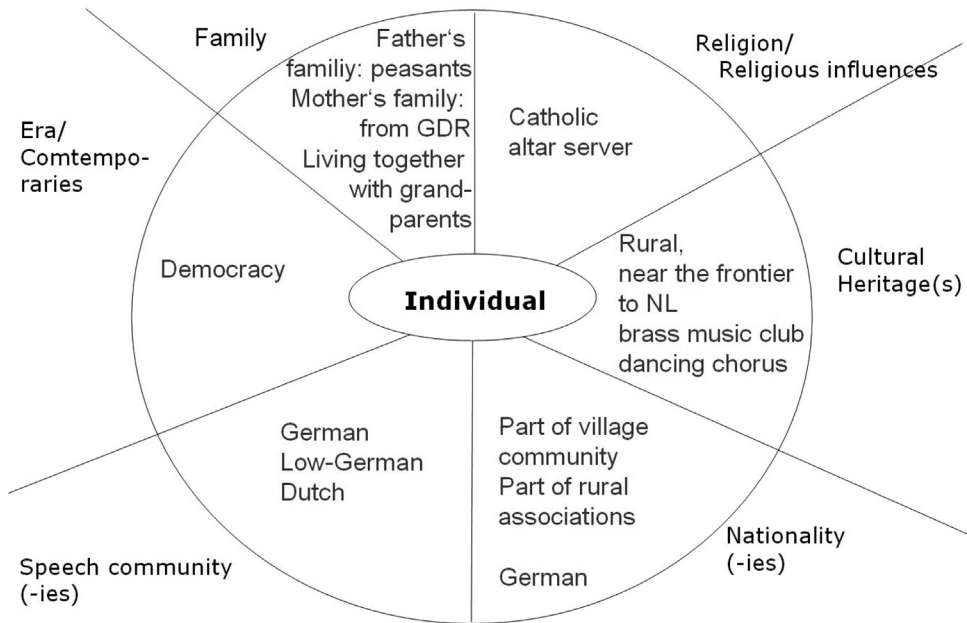


Fig. 5

olic. Consequently, Christmas AND Ramadan are important to her. She experienced socialism/communism AND democracy. She is a perfect example of transcultural personalities.

The father's family of this student are peasants; his mother originates from the former German Democratic Republic. What is really rare in Germany is the fact that he as a young person lives in an extended family together with his grand-parents. His cultural roots lie in the rural area near the Dutch border, in a village brass music club and 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 already this early 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 extent Germany is a mixed society nowadays. And even 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 adher-

ents of the Nazis, or they are children of the so-called 68-generation, and this might be the reason why religion doesn't play such a big role in their lives any more – this list could be continued.

Filling in the form offered the students an increased awareness about their diverse roots and showed them how important the influence of language, family, origins, religion is to 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.

What I wanted to achieve by these “identity check-ups” was to make the students aware of the fact that

- an individual is not only shaped by

being a part of a national or ethnic culture (and thus easily to be described by cultural standards)

- cultural heritage is of course not genetically transmitted (“national character”) and not invariant, but is a process,

and that

- each individual participates in this process of global exchange, modifies the process and is shaped by his or her taking part in the process.

Thus, I hope that the teaching of cultural standards will not foster pigeonhole thinking, and in this way the teaching of intercultural communication may avoid establishing further stereotypes. I hope that after these “identity check-ups” students will be more aware of their own culture and will be better prepared to perceive a common ground with people from other cultures.

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DĖL TAPATYBĖS: TARPKULTŪRINIO SUPRATIMO MOKYMAS TARPKULTŪRINĖJE KLASĖJE

Ulrike Meyer

S a n t r a u k a

Būti grupės nariu – ar kultūrinės, religinės ar tautos – ką tai reiškia? kodėl mes norime būti tam tikros bendruomenės nariai, nors tai dažnai susiję su kitų baime ar agresija? kas tai – tapatybė?

Amin Maalouf, libanietis, krikščionis, rašantis prancūziškai, dėl savo prigimties turi daugelį tapatybių. Toks pavyzdys rodo, kad bendras „tapatybės“

suvoikimas yra netinkamas ir netgi pavojingas. Toks pavyzdys atskleidžia, kad tapatybė negali būti stabili, ir ji apibrėžiama atsižvelgiant į priklausymą grupei.

Šiame straipsnyje siekiama parodyti, kaip metodus “Examen d’identité” gali būti taikomas auditorijoje ir kurio rezultatai gali būti lyginami ir aptariami studentams įvardijus tapatybės elementus ir atitikimą.