I have a lot of respect for charities and NGOs and have always been fascinated by their strong engagement to contribute to better worlds. In 2005 I decided to join a programme organized by the Finnish Red Cross. Entitled “becoming friends with foreigners”, it consisted in “training” volunteers to help immigrants and refugees in the City of Turku (South-Western Finland) to integrate better in Finnish society and find local friends. When I contacted the organization to register, their response was negative at first. Even though I have lived nearly half of my life in the country, I am not a “real” Finn (I was born in another European country). This seemed to puzzle them: why would a “foreigner” want to help other foreigners? But most importantly they wondered if living in Finland but not being born there qualified me for the training. After some extensive e-mail exchanges, they accepted to take me on. The sessions consisted of discussions on different themes and visits to refugee centres in the area. I shall always remember one session where women refugees and former trainees had been invited for a panel discussion. We the trainees were not allowed to ask anything, the organizers led the discussions. I felt quite amused but also saddened by the discussion. The panel moderators asked the following questions to the participants (amongst others): when you’re invited over by people from your country, do you need to bring a present? If yes, what sort of a present? How do you greet people from your country? When speaking to people from your country, what should be avoided? Etc. These questions are typically related to a much-discussed concept that I shall return to later on in my contribution: intercultural competence. One by one, the participants gave some answers to the questions. For the first one, the speakers all had the same motto: “it depends on who is inviting and the guests themselves!”. Annoyed, the panel moderators told the Somali, Russian, Tunisian and Serbian guests to be “more helpful” for “our friend-trainees” and to give us concrete answers. As a reaction, they all started to present us with “concrete elements”: “bring yellow roses, don’t bring red ones”; “bring tea but not coffee”, etc. You could tell that some of them felt extremely uncomfortable as they delivered what can be called “cultural recipes”. When answering the question “how do you greet people from your country?”, one participant said that people usually kiss twice on the cheeks. Now how accurate is this statement? Does it mean that you kiss your boss in the morning? Strangers on the street? It is easy to see the limits of such elements especially if they are presented context-free, i.e. with whom, when, where, why, how does an encounter take place? Of course it is easy to criticize: immigration to Finland is recent and finding some solutions to the resulting problems can be complicated. Again I have a lot of respect for the wonderful work provided by organizations such as the Red Cross but this just didn’t seem to work for me.

This is the problem with most understandings of intercultural competence. In fact in the adjective intercultural, it is too often the “cultural” which overtakes the “inter”, which should indicate a relationship not just the superposition of “cultures”. We have a serious problem here. At the recent Global University Summit (2011, Besançon, France), where I was giving a talk on student mobility, a very fascinating discussion around the concept of culture and especially culture shock took place amongst the international students who were gathered to negotiate recommendations for the next G20 meeting. For
one of the recommendations on international student mobility the room was divided into
two clear camps: those who refused to include the phrase *culture shock* – because of its
fuzziness – to point at some of the problems that mobile students encounter abroad and
for which governments should provide help and those who asserted that culture shock is a
concrete phenomenon which they had themselves experienced in “other cultures”. This is
quite revelatory of the current scientific debates around the concept: what is culture?
What is it that we talk about when we refer to it? Is it a concept we can work with when
we deal with interculturality? Like many other scholars, my answer is negative for many
reasons.

First of all, *cultures* are not people; people are not *cultures*. We often hear the
phrases “cultures meet”, “the clash of cultures”, “when I went to Japan, I experienced
Japanese culture”, etc. But these are counterintuitive: in fact it is not cultures that
*encounter* or *clash* or *are experienced*, but it is people who, together, constantly create
“cultures”, or more precisely experiences, sociality, relationships, etc. and not always in a
systematic and logical manner.

My second point is that cultures can never be found as “pure”, “authentic” and
“different” as presented by e.g. the media or marketing (tourism). This means that it is
impossible to grasp or describe them fully (cf. the misleading “cultural recipes” presented
above). When you look closer, cultures are always the results of mixing and *mélange*
triggered by encounters with other groups of people. Recently again we were told by our
global media that an ‘untouched’ primitive tribe had been found in the Amazonian forest.
I remember the last time this happened: there was a lot of hype around it. But we soon
discovered that this was a set-up see a hoax, that they were actually neither ‘primitive’
nor ‘untouched’. On a discussion forum about these tribes, some participants urged
governments to leave them alone and not to destroy their “culture”. This imagined culture
that they were talking about here is the sort of culture one would find in a museum such
as the “Quai Branly Museum” which opened in 2006 in Paris. When the museum opened,
a lot of anthropologists complained about the way the exhibitions were organized. Two of
their arguments were that “cultures” were represented as very static (which gave the
museum some sort of mausoleum-like atmosphere) and that interaction and mixing
between the “cultures” were ignored as they appear as clearly geographically separate
entities. Actually it is quite interesting that the museum’s slogan should be “Quai Branly
Museum, the place where cultures enter into dialogue”. Again it is about cultures not
people… it is about the “cultural” not the “inter-”…

By constantly ignoring people and emphasizing culture when we talk about
interculturality, we tend to forget that people are complex beings who are not governed
by “culture” – robot-like – but by many different elements such as the people they
communicate with, the places where they are, their health, their education and family
background, etc. It is also important to note – even though it will sound obvious – that
some people are honest while some people lie. Actually we all have to “act as if” at some
point when we interact with others, because that’s what society is about. We do also need
from time to time to keep up appearances. Imagine that your best friend is giving you a
present that you either find useless or ugly, how many of us would actually tell them that
we don’t like it? Some people would, but I assume only a minority. When we meet
someone, we need to negotiate who we are and who they are. With some people we are
more at ease, with others we need to be more careful. And even with those we feel close
to, sometimes we need to “play”. Because of that, I believe that we need to beware of discourses on culture as they can serve the purpose of presenting others with easy explanations and even sometimes manipulating others. Of course today it is not “interculturally correct” to say that but a lot of research (and even our own experiences) tell us otherwise. For Molina, Estrada & Burnett (2004) what they call “cultural camouflage” is omnipresent in our societies. They give the example of someone who arrives late at a party and says: “Hey Honey, sorry I am late, but I am Latino”. Latino often refers to people from the South, especially South America. Now if we take this argument at face value, does it mean that all the people in this part of the world are late? Is this really an explanation? An acceptable explanation? Many people would agree with this (those who have been there, but also those who never have; people from there would probably also agree). I don’t believe in such statements. I have the feeling that behind this “excuse” there is more than “culture”.

Let me give you two examples. The first one took place at my university. At the end of a course I failed a Spanish student because he had copied large sections of an article written by a scholar from Cambridge, England. The student contacted me and asked for explanations, claiming he was the best student at his home university. I invited him to my office. When he came he started shouting at me saying that I was a horrible lecturer. I gave him his paper, in which I had highlighted all the sentences that he had “borrowed”. When I asked him why he thought I had done so on his paper, he replied that he had no idea and thought it was not really nice of a lecturer to do so. We then went to my computer and I typed in one of the sentences he had copied in Google. When the original text was retrieved, I asked him to explain. His answer was immediate: “but in my culture we are allowed to do this”. On hearing this argument, I asked him to leave my office. Why did he claim that? First of all I am convinced that he didn’t believe in this a second, but that this was an easy way out not to lose face. Second, he might have thought that by putting his “culture” on the table I would have showed some understanding and reconsidered my decision to fail him.

I consider my second example to be ludicrous but it shows us how the tired old notion of culture can be misused to explain problems between people. I attended a seminar once on counseling intercultural couples. One of the presenters, who was a researcher, had worked on a Tunisian-Finnish couple. During her presentation, she showed that the couple was dysfunctional. All her explanations were based on the idea that Tunisian and Finnish cultures were too different to “work together”. During her presentation, she didn’t give any concrete example of how the two different cultures could lead to clashes or misunderstandings in the couple. I asked her during question time to give some examples. She could only think of one, which was supposed to reflect cultural difference: one of the things that irritated the wife was the fact that her husband squeezed their toothpaste tube from the middle, while she always squeezed it from the bottom. According to the researcher, the husband’s habit was related to his cultural background… Isn’t that a ridiculous argument? Don’t we all know people from our own country who do that? What is cultural about this?

Now let’s return to the concept of intercultural competence. Clearly as has been explained until now, being *interculturally competent* doesn’t mean thinking about the ‘other’ in terms of his/her culture or of cultural differences. It is actually, I believe, trying to move beyond these ideas. It also consists in meeting the ‘Other’ as a person who might
be different (just like I am different to my neighbour in my “home country” even though we might share a first language and the same imaginary about our country) but who is also very similar. It is about asking questions and being as honest as possible and accept that it is always through ‘images’ that I meet other people – and that I should pay attention to them. Another aspect is to refrain from categorizing too quickly the ‘Other’. This doesn’t mean that we should try to get rid of stereotypes, because that is impossible as we need them to ‘survive’ in this complex world. But we need to put them on the table when we interact with others and try to understand why we are using them – and hopefully act beyond them.

Very often when we meet someone in some intercultural contexts, the first question that we ask is “where do you come from?”. Having to travel a lot and face this question on a regular basis, I had decided a few years ago that I would not answer this question and find a way to start conversations on a different note. Not because I am ashamed of my origins or because I want to be unpleasant, but because I thought it would be a nice way of trying to meet others through other means (often saying where you come from leads to a static image of who you are). Reactions from my interlocutors were mixed: some insisted that I told them my nationality (police-like), while others found my way of engaging with them original. I actually made many friends through this last strategy. Of course it is difficult to do that but I find it to be more exciting: the ‘other’ is then a real “enigma” with whom you can construct something more unpredictable than using cultures to explain each other. Next time you meet someone from abroad, try it! You’ll see how liberating it can be…