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## Intercultural Competence Through Intentional Engagement

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## THE SWISS JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RESEARCH

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## Editorial

Intercultural education has long emphasized the value of exposure to other cultures as a path to growth. While this exposure is important, it is not, in itself, sufficient. As Bennett (2025) reminds us, it is intentional and reflective engagement with cultural differences, not just their presence, that plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural competence. This shift—from passive exposure to active engagement—demands more from individuals, institutions, and international collaborations alike. It asks us not just to witness diversity, but to work within it.

This issue of the *Swiss Journal of Intercultural Education, Training and Research* explores how reflective, deliberate interaction can become a mechanism for deeper understanding, inclusion, and innovation.

In their article, *Psychological Safety: A Framework for Social Sustainability in Multilingual Work Teams*, Sylvia Manchen Spörri, Moana Monnier, and Martina Stangel-Meseke draw attention to how linguistic diversity within teams does not automatically translate into high performance or intercultural growth. Instead, when psychological safety is lacking, team members are less likely to engage openly, share information, or learn collectively. Their findings underscore the importance of creating environments of trust and mutual accountability—conditions where genuine intercultural competence can flourish.

Patricia Szobonya and Catherine Roche, in their timely contribution *Knowledge Diplomacy: Geopolitical Activism through Virtual Exchange*, further this theme by showing how virtual collaboration across borders can foster mutual understanding and collective problem-solving. Through their exploration of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), they demonstrate how structured, purposeful exchanges empower students to not only encounter global issues, but to engage with them developing intercultural competence alongside global citizenship.

Edwin Hoffman looks beyond intercultural communication in his contribution *Inclusive Communication and the TOPOI-model: Beyond intercultural communication and competence*. He provokes debate about the foundations and frameworks of intercultural communication.

As these conversations evolve, so too must our commitment to not merely observe cultural difference, but to reflect, engage, and co-create meaning within it. We hope this issue provides not only insights but also prompts for your own reflective practice—whether as educator, researcher, or practitioner. Through this shared inquiry, we collectively strengthen a body of knowledge that reflects the richness and complexity of the global communities we seek to understand and support.

**Jillaine Farrar, Associate Editor, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts - Business**

**Eugenia Arvanitis, Editor, University of Patras**

Source: Bennett, M. (2025). *The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity for experiencing otherness*. In S. Liu, A. Komisarof, Z. Hua, & L. Obijiofer. *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. (pp. 3–17). Sage.



# Psychological safety: A framework for social sustainability in multilingual work teams

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*Abstract: In this paper, we examined empirical observations from multicultural and multilingual work teams. While it was anticipated that team members would take responsibility and collaborate effectively by using a common Lingua Franca—a shared language intended to facilitate coordination—our findings revealed a gap between expectation and practice. Specifically, teams with pronounced linguistic diversity were entrusted with less responsibility, engaged less frequently in communication using the Lingua Franca, and exhibited generally lower levels of work-related interactions. These factors ultimately contributed to reduced team performance. Building on these insights, we propose a theoretical model suggesting that the establishment of Psychological Safety within such teams can significantly lower the inhibition threshold for seeking missing information, openly addressing errors, and fostering collective learning. This environment of trust, mutual accountability, and reliability could unlock the latent potential of diverse teams, enhancing opportunities for cultural exchange and the development of social competencies. By fostering these dynamics, organizations could better leverage the advantages of multilingual and multicultural diversity to promote innovation and resilience and therefore be more performative.*

*Keywords: Psychological Safety, Lingua Franca, Multilingual Teams, Social Sustainability, Multicultural Teams*

Our everyday lives are characterized by interpersonal interactions. The people we interact with are more or less diverse in terms of their roots, origin, main language, etc. The extent to which this diversity is visible depends on the context in which we move, such as the nature of our work or where we live. But the way we deal with this diversity, which has huge potential for innovation, learning and development (Hofstra, 2020), is also shaped by many different factors. In this article, we use empirical observations of intercultural work teams to promote a concept that reinforces impact factors for positive effects of diversity and minimizes the negative ones. Since diversity can lead to misunderstandings, be it only through the different mother tongues of the people involved, it is important to foster an open dialogue, in which the problems can be discussed without prejudices or fear.

## Potential synergies in a globalized multicultural work environment

Globalization describes the increasing worldwide networking of the economy, technology, culture and society (Alt, 2024). It has far-reaching effects on labor markets by fundamentally changing access, production structures, labor relations, among other things. For employers, globalization creates expanded markets and provides access to a global and multicultural pool of talents. Companies can tap into new potential employee groups through international recruitment and migration-related local population growth (Stofkova and Sukalova, 2020), which can counteract major economic difficulties, such as the shortage of skilled workers (Oliinyk et al., 2021). Workers on the other hand, benefit from increased access to employment

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and a diversified work environment that promotes cultural exchange and social competences, thus strengthening some of the most important skills and abilities of the future world of occupations (Ehlers, 2020; Monnier, 2024), with the important proviso that the economic growth be combined with the safeguarding of fair working conditions.

One of the main effects on a globalized world of work is brought about by migration and the resulting social, economic, political and demographic changes (Farashah and Blomquist, 2020). Over the last six decades the patterns for migration have changed considerably, which has had a profound impact on the Swiss labor market (Espahangizi, 2022). While migration to Switzerland in the 1960s was strongly influenced by the guest worker policy, migrants often came from southern Europe and were primarily regarded as temporary workers. They were often employed under precarious conditions, with limited social rights and restricted opportunities for integration (Espahangizi, 2022). In the decades that followed, with globalization and the politically driven increase in people's mobility, the diversity of countries of origin and cultures increased. In addition, indirect labor migration through refugee and asylum migration as well as family reunification played another important role in the Swiss labor market (BfS, 2024; Espahangizi, 2022). Given the number of people concerned, one can no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that the integration of migrants into the labor market has not only an economic but also a psychosocial dimension. Recognition, cultural sensitivity and the creation of inclusive working environments are key factors in making sustainable use of the potential of cultural diversity for work environments (Kauffeld, 2019), for society and for the economy in general. This ethnic-origin-related plurality often also implies a rich linguistic diversity. This has become clearly visible in recent decades and has considerably enriched an already multilingual Switzerland with German, French, Italian and Romansch as national languages. Linguistic diversity leads to new opportunities for communication and collaboration, especially in internationally oriented companies. Multilingual teams can tap into information and knowledge from different sources and thus gain wider access in different regards. Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, the ability to switch between several languages promotes cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills. Studies on schoolchildren show that multilingualism strengthens perspective-taking skills, allowing team members to interact more effectively and develop innovative solutions (Yang, 2023). Yet, a common (working-) language facilitates the exchange of knowledge between different cultural groups. In Switzerland this is often implemented through the use of a so-called *lingua franca*.

## Lingua Franca, a common ground for intercultural communication

Research on multilingualism in the workplace differentiates between state-level “*language policy*” and corporate “*language management*” (Coray & Duchêne, 2017, p. 11). Multinational corporations strategically manage languages to optimize resources and minimize obstacles, typically designating a primary, corporate, and local language (Thomas, 2008). Measures include working languages, translation services and linguistic staff development. However, studies show discrepancies between requirements and practical implementation (Lüdi, Höchle Meier & Yanaprasart, 2013; Coray & Duchêne, 2017). Language management influences power relations and participation, but is often organized unsystematically (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997; Vaara, Piekkari & Sääntti, 2005). Yanaprasart's (2016a) field study on managing multilingualism and cultural diversity in Switzerland highlights that linguistic diversity is often integrated into diversity programs but is frequently perceived as a challenge. To be effective, however, linguistic diversity management should be specifically adapted to the needs of the company and its workforce.

A common strategy for managing linguistic diversity is establishing a shared language of communication, or lingua franca. In large international corporations, this is typically English. In medium-sized industrial companies in Switzerland, where employees come from various cultural backgrounds, the chosen language is often the national language, German (Lüdi, Höchle Meier & Yanaprasart, 2016). Yanaprasart (2016b, p. 97) identifies the practice of "*one language only*" in some companies in Switzerland, where communication is consistently limited to the defined "*corporate language*" as the lingua franca. Adopting a standardized corporate language aims to streamline communication. However, this approach often overlooks the fact that a lingua franca functions as a working language, typically developed only to a limited degree for specific professional contexts and purposes (Seidlhofer, 2004; Jenkins, 2006). In multilingual teams, individuals from diverse linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds collaborate on shared activities where conventions of behavior and communication are not yet established, requiring step-by-step negotiation. Furthermore, users of a lingua franca bring their prior experiences and strategies from multilingual contexts into these new communities (Mendes De Oliveira, 2024). Participants in multilingual team meetings often act as though they understand one another, even when genuine mutual understanding is absent (Poncini, 2004). This is due to the fact, that there are different expectations regarding the process and content of meetings, which vary from culture to culture. This is evident, for instance, in the deliberate handling of an agenda, the quick and explicit identification of critical or decision-relevant issues, addressing disagreements directly, and determining whether or when humor is appropriate (Günther, 1993; Martini, 2008). Central linguistic actions such as justifying, explaining, or clarifying carry different meanings across languages. As a result, native speakers and those with near-native proficiency in the lingua franca consistently hold an advantage in argumentative decision-making processes (Thielmann, 1999).

A useful strategy for addressing communication challenges is offering alternatives through reformulations when the original message is not immediately understood. However, this could lead to unforeseen, non-functional effects such as ambiguity (Bühlig, 1996). As comprehensibility is hindered, misunderstandings arise, leading to delays in establishing action goals, finalizing action patterns, and transferring knowledge. (Dannerer, 2005, 2008; Manchen Spörri & Hohenstein, 2012). This has a negative impact on the efficiency of communication in multilingual teams.

The communicative performance that can be achieved in a lingua franca situation ultimately also depends on the individual's language skills. Therefore, having a direct effect on whether and, to what extent a person's professional input is recognized (Tenzer, Pudenko & Harzing, 2014). In an Interview, the head of diversity and inclusion of a Swiss company pictures this as follows: "*We know from research that if somebody talks to you with an accent and somebody does not talk to you with an accent, you will pay more attention to the one without the accent; even if they are giving equal value statements. And that becomes really important then to manage these differences that that person is given enough time to think, that person is given enough time to express themselves and you really listen to what they are saying beyond the accent or the bad words*" (Yanaprasart, 2016b, p. 102). Allowing time to find formulations, however, comes with the disadvantages of using a lingua franca: communication slows down and the content may be greatly simplified and no longer do justice to the subject matter (Lehmann & van den Bergh, 2004). These above-mentioned factors have a fundamental influence on the quality of interaction in multilingual work situations (Lüdi, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007). This raises the question of how to build a culture and a mindset that makes people aware of and accept the process changes brought about by multilingualism, while at the same time keeping productivity high.

## Psychological Safety, establishing a framework to seize the opportunities of diversity

Psychological Safety, a concept introduced by occupational psychologist Amy Edmondson, refers to a shared belief within a team or organization that interpersonal risks in collaboration do not result in negative consequences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Edmondson states that *“the degree to which people view the environment as conducive to interpersonally risky behaviors like speaking up or asking for help, is a salient variable in work environments in which learning matters.”* (Edmondson et al., 2016, p. 66). The concept of Psychological Safety is closely tied to the dynamics of teamwork, as it lays the foundation for effective communication, innovation, and learning. It differs from trust in that it applies not only to dyadic relationships but to the overall team climate (Edmondson, Kramer & Cook, 2004). It addresses the collective perception that team members respect and support one another, irrespective of hierarchies or power differentials (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Edmondson’s research demonstrates that Psychological Safety is a crucial prerequisite for learning and performance within organizations. In teams with a high level of Psychological Safety, employees feel comfortable acknowledging uncertainties or weaknesses, trusting that their contributions will be received constructively. This fosters openness to feedback, a willingness to introduce innovative ideas, and a commitment to continuous improvement (Edmondson et al., 2016). Additionally, Psychological Safety facilitates a constructive approach to handling mistakes, viewing them as opportunities for learning rather than as personal or professional threats (Smeets et al., 2021). This culture of error tolerance is especially crucial in dynamic and complex work environments, where adaptability and continuous learning are indispensable. It is equally important in contexts characterized by heightened uncertainty, such as performing a job in a foreign language.

Psychological Safety carries implications on both individual and collective levels. On an individual level, it reduces psychological stress and anxiety (Turner & Harder, 2018), thereby enhancing cognitive and emotional performance (Agah, 2021). On a team and organizational level, it helps foster a positive work culture that values collaboration and diversity. Edmondson and Brandsby emphasize that Psychological Safety is particularly important for unlocking the potential of diverse teams (2023; Singh et al., 2013). Without a secure environment, the unique perspectives and skills arising from diversity cannot be effectively utilized.

### *How to establish Psychological Safety*

Changing work cultures does not have clearly defined processes, as many different factors play an important role and, different functions have distinct influence on these transformations (Gilmore, Shea and Useem, 1997). In regard to establishing Psychological Safety, the leaders play a key role that requires intentional leadership practices. They model respectful behavior, actively solicit input, and encourage the expression of concerns (Smeets et al., 2021). By practicing active listening and providing constructive feedback, they reinforce the perception that all contributions are valued (Gallo, 2023). They function as role models and lay the ground for talking about errors and ask for clarifications, if they do so themselves. As described above, this also means that employees with poorer language skills should be given more time to perform so that their contributions are not perceived as less good due to language barriers.

Another contributing factor is the responsibility employees are given by the organization and that is perceived by themselves for their own and their team’s task. If none is



given, even the greatest amount of security will make it difficult to commit oneself to tasks in settings with high level of insecurities, as induced by language-related uncertainties. In contrast, the implied sense of accountability encourages the use of a psychologically safe environment and finally leads to better performance (Latessa et al., 2023).

### ***Psychological Safety as a gateway to Social Sustainability at work***

The definitions of social sustainability are ambiguous (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011), but the quintessence, which can be gleaned from many different literature sources, is that, in the context of occupations, it involves fostering and maintaining social systems and relationships that enable equitable, inclusive, and resilient teams to thrive over the long term. It encompasses organizational structures, cultures and behaviors that advance social equity, promote human well-being, and safeguard cultural and social capital. On a meta-level, it reflects the capacity of societies to navigate challenges like inequality, exclusion, and cultural degradation, fostering environments where participation, empowerment, and agency are accessible to all, particularly those in marginalized or vulnerable positions (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). Therefore, within organizational frameworks, social sustainability should emphasize the integration of diversity, inclusion, and equitable resource distribution to ensure that economic and environmental goals are pursued without compromising social well-being (Aslam and Ghouse, 2023). It relies on building relationships rooted in trust, mutual respect, and collaboration among individuals, communities, and institutions, thus enhancing collective capacity for adaptation and transformation, the key factors of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2023). Ultimately, social sustainability represents both a continuous process and an achievable outcome (Docherty, Kira and Shani, 2008). It seeks to balance the fulfillment of immediate societal needs with the preservation of the social and cultural foundations required for future generations (WCED, 1987).

We can therefore conclude that establishing a psychological safety culture paves the way to social sustainability.

### **Psychological Safety and the use of Lingua Franca**

Psychological safety is crucial for communication in multicultural and multilingual teams, as it promotes openness, trust and mutual respect. In such an environment, members share ideas more easily and reduce fear of making mistakes, which is particularly important when language barriers exist. Furthermore, psychological safety strengthens the understanding of cultural differences, improves conflict resolution and increases the willingness to actively contribute to team communication. This leads to more productive and creative teams in which all members can make a valuable contribution to the team dynamic, regardless of language or cultural background.

Gibson and Gibbs (2006) investigate the role of psychological safety in global, virtual teams characterised by national and linguistic diversity, among other things. Initially, they found a negative correlation between national diversity and innovation in teams. However, when psychological safety was added as a moderator, it was shown that teams with a high level of psychological safety are better able to deal with linguistic and cultural barriers and therefore work more innovatively. This helps to reduce misunderstandings caused by language and cultural differences and promotes collaboration. Farley, Dawson, Greenaway and Daría (2022) found that in new formed multinational teams international team members had lower initial psychological safety compared to home national team members. In addition international team members experienced slower growth in psychological safety over time compared to home

national team members. The relationship between national status and competence ratings was partially mediated by psychological safety growth and verbal behavior. This shows that inter-individual differences must be taken into account. However, Nurmi and Koroma (2022) also show limitations. They found that non-native speakers in multinational companies cope with language demands by building a psychologically safe language climate, which provides emotional benefits but may also decrease innovative performance by simplifying the lingua franca. Language-coping mechanisms and psychological safety play a counterproductive role and act as a barrier to innovativeness.

## **The current situation in practice: Insights from an empirical observational study**

The following empirical study is based on a research project on language diversity in semi-autonomous teams and the resulting challenges for corporate language management (Manchen Spörri & Weininger, 2021). For this article, we have re-examined the data from the perspective of psychological safety.

### ***Research Design***

A case study of a company in Switzerland examined three multilingual teams using a qualitative mixed-methods approach. The investigation considered different levels, including individual, group, and organizational levels, and explored the relationships between these levels. At the organizational and management level, selected documents pertinent to the organization were analyzed, and four semi-open expert interviews were conducted with decision-makers from management (executive management, HR management, department management, support staff) to ascertain the contextual conditions (organizational structure and culture, HR management, understanding of leadership) and to document organizational policies and practices in the area of language and diversity management. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to content analysis in accordance with the procedures outlined by Mayring (2008).

At the group level, three team meetings of two semi-autonomous groups and three coordination meetings of the group spokespersons with the department head and his deputy were videotaped. The first session was conducted as a test session for familiarization and was not evaluated. Two times two group sessions of approximately 30 minutes each and two group sessions of the coordination group of approximately 60 minutes each were transcribed and analyzed.

At the individual level, nine semi-structured photo-based interviews were conducted with employees from all groups. The interviews, based on the photo-elicitation method developed by Harper (2005), aimed to make the abstract subject of discussion visible and thus facilitate a more concrete and concretizable discussion. Additionally, the method was employed to bridge language barriers. The questions addressed the following key topics: What positive experiences or lessons have you had with regard to communication within the team during meetings? What factors have contributed to these experiences being positive? What strategies have you developed, or do you employ to facilitate effective communication within the team? Please provide any further insights you may have regarding your perception of communication within the team, particularly in the context of meetings. The interviews with individual employees were transcribed, coded in the Atlas computer program, paraphrased, and summarized in relation to the research questions.

## ***Results***

The case study focused on a medium-sized Swiss company that engages in the production, repair, and sale of household appliances on an international scale. The language utilized at the headquarters of the analyzed company is German. The repair and service department is staffed by semi-skilled and skilled specialists who operate in a semi-autonomous manner within teams and in conjunction with a support team. This area is overseen by a department head, who, in turn, oversees a rotating group of spokespersons.

The Repair and Service department is comprised of the department head, a coordination group, several repair and service groups, and a small support team. The study was conducted in three groups within the Repair and Service department, namely the coordination group, the semi-autonomous working groups designated as "Opera" and "Silk". A total of 26 individuals are employed in the three groups under analysis. Staff turnover is minimal, with the majority of employees having been acquainted for an extended period. The teams are distinguished by their linguistic heterogeneity, with eight distinct native languages represented among their members (Albanian, Bosnian, Italian, Mandarin, Portuguese, Swiss German, Turkish, and Vietnamese). Only a minority of the employees have German as their first language.

### ***Semi-autonomous group work in the analyzed company***

The department management, support staff, and group spokespersons convene on a regular basis for a coordination meeting. These serve as the conduit for communication with the semi-autonomous working groups. As indicated in the company's management reports and relevant documentation, the groups demonstrate a notable degree of self-regulation. The group meetings serve as a conduit for disseminating new technical information, facilitating discussions, and addressing work-related issues, including quality deficiencies and excessively long throughput times. The groups organize themselves within the team, assuming responsibility for tasks such as establishing work schedules, coordinating vacation and team-building activities, mediating internal conflicts, and conducting mutual performance reviews. The technical problems are resolved by the technical support team. This fulfills a fundamental requirement for psychological safety within the team, namely the capacity to assume responsibility.

The head of department's understanding of leadership, as ascertained in an expert interview, is in some areas at odds with the basic understanding of semi-autonomous group work as defined by the management. The manager places great importance on the accurate transfer and comprehension of information. He advocates for employee involvement, particularly in matters pertaining to team autonomy, such as conflict resolution and fostering a positive team culture. He consults with the group spokespersons on task-related matters and makes decisions regarding technical issues independently. The manager serves as a role model for fostering Psychological Safety within the team. However, his contradictory behavior regarding accountability could potentially contribute to psychological insecurity.

### ***Language management and linguistic rules for the linguistically diverse, semi-autonomous teams - results from the expert interviews and document analysis***

The company is cognizant of the communicative challenges inherent to its linguistically diverse workforce. Consequently, it has devised linguistic regulations, which, though not explicitly delineated in the organizational documents, are nevertheless known to managers and employees and are tacitly incorporated into training materials and personnel selection and assessment

tools. As stated by representatives of the management team, High German is employed as the corporate and meeting language for verbal communication and in written documents with the objective of ensuring comprehension among all parties.

Moreover, the company places a premium on ensuring that technical information is accurately understood and implemented. In addition to verbal information, the company provides short written documents and images. Furthermore, group spokespersons and groups undergo training in procedures for ensuring comprehension in moderator training and communication courses. This ensures that all employees receive and can understand the necessary information, which serves as a foundation for joint work and mutual agreements. Furthermore, comprehension is evaluated through the administration of tests following the provision of instructions. In the event of inadequate understanding, additional training is provided. One illustrative instance of language training is the practice of moderators of meetings inquiring about the team's comprehension and requesting that they paraphrase the statements in their own words. However, the head of department also recognises problems with this approach: *'It is relatively difficult to find out whether an employee has really understood without exposing them. Because doing this in front of everyone is certainly not the right way. But if you have a one-to-one discussion afterwards, you realise that they may not have fully understood everything'* (AL). The strategy of ensuring understanding can, therefore, have the unintended consequence of undermining psychological safety in team communication.

In the course of the interviews, the management members described the Psychological Safety climate as open in terms of communication, error-tolerant, and helpful: *'... and also get help from colleagues who have really understood it. They help each other'* (GL)). Another declared and largely achieved goal of the company language policy of using a common working language is to avoid the formation of linguistic-cultural subgroups and to exclude individuals. *'But if they are in a team, then High German is spoken, so German is spoken. Because otherwise the person next door won't understand what the other person is saying and then they start laughing and then one person has the feeling that they're talking about him and then there's fire in the roof again'* (GL).

### ***Linguistic practices and communication in the team – results from the observations of the group meetings***

The head of department and the group spokespersons employ the use of reformulated instructions and statements as a means of facilitating comprehension and ensuring mutual understanding, particularly in instances where there is a perceived lack of clarity or misunderstanding. It was observed that the objective and the actual meaning of an instruction are altered when reformulation occurs. This phenomenon occurs when new verbs are repeatedly employed and the anticipated outcome of the task is no longer explicitly delineated.

For instance, it was observed that an assignment to determine a suitable date for a team-building event occurring outside of normal working hours became a vague directive devoid of a clearly defined outcome as a result of the unreflective incorporation of additional verbs such as *"discuss"*, *"talk about it"* and *"think about it"*. The assignment remained undecided and had to be finalized over the course of several meetings, which was both time-consuming and communicatively inefficient. In the reformulations, the group spokesperson was unable to effectively communicate the appealing nature of her message. Additionally, the moderator relied on cultural patterns when giving instructions, which were not fully understood without further explanation. This highlights the challenge of achieving clarity in communication in the lingua franca, which is crucial for fostering Psychological Safety.

Another recommended practice for language training is for moderators to inquire as to whether all information has been comprehended and to have team members summarize the statements in their own words. This emphasis on disseminating information and mechanically verifying the receipt of the factual message gives rise to a relationship that may be described as that of a teacher and a student. Subsequently, the team members frequently demonstrated a passive demeanor, refraining from offering any suggestions of their own. In addition to the transmission of factual information, the language practice may have also conveyed a relational message, whereby the employees were treated in a manner that infantilized and placed them in a subordinate position. The emergence of empathic questions is precluded by the "sender-receiver character" of this approach, thereby undermining Psychological Safety.

Furthermore, mutual understanding and assistance with language difficulties can be observed in group sessions. Native or highly proficient speakers simplify their statements and reduce complexity. Meanwhile, less proficient speakers attempt to comprehend the meaning of statements by listening carefully and focusing on key words. They rely on redundant statements through repetitions that do not change the meaning. This reception strategy is often not compatible with the oversimplification of the native Speakers. The creation of a psychologically safe basis for understanding has the disadvantage of strongly simplifying and slowing down communication.

Linguistic practices and communication from the perspective of the individuals - results from the photo-elicitation interviews with the group members

In essence, all respondents underscored the efficacy of the collaboration, citing a high level of attunement and familiarity among team members. This is facilitated by the fact that they spend their breaks together, engage in conversation, express positive affect, and provide encouragement to one another. Consequently, the groups exhibit an open and direct culture of dialogue, wherein problems are addressed and suggestions for improvement are proffered, and individuals are encouraged to inquire about any matters of which they are uncertain. In the workplace, individuals provide assistance and guidance to one another in the event of difficulties, remind colleagues of impending deadlines, and complete tasks that others may have overlooked. Furthermore, this facilitates the clarification of linguistic misunderstandings. It appears that the team members have established a sense of Psychological Safety and trust with one another. Conversely, individual employees may also experience apprehension regarding the potential for embarrassment if they fail to comprehend the perspectives of their colleagues. However, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent at the juncture between the various groups and other departments.

### ***Effects of linguistic rules and practices on the communicative cooperation requirements in group meetings of language-diverse teams***

Semi-autonomous groups fulfill tasks in a cooperative manner, thereby affording them the opportunity to make decisions collectively. This facilitates both psychological safety and social sustainability. In a multilingual team, communication for task completion is significantly influenced by the language rules and practices of the designated group spokespersons during the meeting moderation process. The manner in which tasks are moderated and handled by these groups influences the extent to which the promise of cooperation inherent to the semi-autonomous working form can be realized.

In theory, semi-autonomous groups would be required to manage cooperation at five levels, from the standardized transfer of information to the weighing of objectives. However, an analysis of the video recordings indicates that the communicative tasks performed by the



groups in their meetings consistently place minimal demands on cooperation. The majority of communicative tasks entail the transfer of information on work-related content (level 1), with minimal consideration of alternative courses of action or strategic planning (level 2). This observation is consistent across all groups. The group's efforts to address a subject at a more elevated strategic level, as initially proposed by the meeting leader, were not only met with passive resistance but were, on numerous occasions, actively impeded. Even though, the majority of the team's attempts to delve deeper into the matter would, in practice, have resulted in only a slight deviation from the established norm of information transfer, with minimal problem-solving.

Three potential explanations for the minimal level of communicative cooperation requirements can be derived from an exploratory analysis of the case study material. Firstly, the aforementioned misunderstandings can be observed as a result of the language practice of reformulation in the group meetings, which effectively downgrades decision-making tasks to discussion tasks. Secondly, the head of department's understanding of leadership and the linguistic limitations of the group speakers in the lingua franca situation play a role in negotiating the level of cooperation requirements. As previously stated, the head of department's interpretation of leadership frequently conflicts with the fundamental concept of semi-autonomous group work as defined by the management. For example, an observation of a meeting reveals that a group spokesperson's request for additional time for a specific work process is rejected by the head of department with counter-arguments, yet without considering her reasons and alternative options, as not feasible, and without addressing the development of alternative strategies. The group spokesperson is unable to assert her request, partly due to her linguistic limitations. This constellation is not conducive to psychological safety.

Thirdly, the interview and observation data indicate that more complex questions are often deferred to subsequent dialogue situations outside the meeting and frequently occur concurrently with the head of department. The group spokespersons indicate that the primary objective of the team meeting is to facilitate the accurate dissemination of work-related information from the head of department to the group members. They perceive their role as primarily that of a "messenger function" in the exchange of information and the transmission of instructions. However, the responsibility that fosters Psychological Safety is not acknowledged.

## **Recommendations for a multilingual practice based on theoretical foundations and empirical observations**

In order for psychological safety to be effectively implemented in multilingual teams in a manner that allows it to reach its full potential, we propose the following actions. It is important to note that these actions will only be effective if they are fully implemented, a crucial finding that has emerged from the empirical analysis.

### ***Enhancing and recognizing autonomy***

*Measures to foster autonomy:* Although decision-making scope may be limited in the broader organizational context, employees should be assigned clear areas of responsibility where they can act independently. For instance, they could be entrusted with partial decisions in projects or processes, enabling greater ownership and accountability.

*Recognition and appreciation:* This autonomy should be explicitly acknowledged, such as through feedback that emphasizes individual contributions. Leaders can highlight successful

autonomous decisions in team meetings, showcasing their positive impact and reinforcing a culture of appreciation.

### ***Promoting clear language and the use of a lingua franca in communication***

*Use of precise language:* Leaders and team members should strive for concise and clear formulations in meetings and discussions, avoiding ambiguous expressions to minimize misunderstandings.

*Documentation and reiteration:* Key points should be documented and reiterated to ensure a shared understanding among all participants. This practice strengthens communication clarity and alignment.

### ***Addressing language-related challenges***

*Providing space for clarification:* When linguistic barriers arise, dedicated time should be allocated for clarification. Team members should be encouraged to ask questions when uncertainties occur, with leaders modeling this behavior to establish an inclusive and supportive atmosphere.

*Use of translators:* In cases where language barriers significantly impede collaboration, translators—either professionals or colleagues with relevant language skills—can be engaged to bridge gaps. This approach should be perceived as a supportive measure rather than a sign of weakness.

### ***Fostering active listening and inquiry***

*Training in active listening:* Teams could benefit from workshops specifically designed to develop active listening skills. This enhances attentiveness and improves the overall quality of communication.

*Allocating additional time for discussions:* Teams with linguistic diversity should allow for more generous timeframes for discussions, as additional time is often required for repetition, clarification, and dialogue compared to monolingual teams.

### ***Valuing diversity and encouraging joint reflection***

*Regular reflection sessions:* Teams should periodically reflect on their collaboration to identify challenges and collaboratively devise solutions. These sessions can promote continuous improvement and shared understanding.

*Making diversity visible:* Cultural and linguistic contributions should be highlighted in team meetings or internal events, fostering an inclusive and positive work environment that values diversity.

These measures represent actionable steps for cultivating a work environment that promotes psychological safety. When implemented consistently, they lay the foundation for social sustainability within organizations characterized by linguistic diversity. By addressing autonomy, communication, and inclusion, these recommendations create the conditions for long-term, equitable collaboration.

## Conclusions

In Switzerland, cultural and linguistic diversity has increased significantly in recent decades due to globalization and migration (Espahangizi, 2022). This development has brought about both opportunities and challenges, especially in the realm of work (Ramos et al., 2016).

When properly harnessed, diversity can foster innovation, learning, and collaboration, unlocking the full potential of diverse teams (Dockx, 2023). However, without the right conditions and frameworks in place, this diversity can lead to misunderstandings, inefficiencies, and even conflict (De Leersnyder, Gündemir and Ağırdağ, 2022). Research over the years has shed light on several key factors that are critical for enabling organizations to benefit from diversity while minimizing its potential downsides. In multilingual and multicultural teams, this mix can lead to innovative solutions and creative thinking that would not emerge in homogenous groups. For organizations, this represents a competitive advantage in an increasingly globalized world. At the same time, diversity comes with inherent challenges. Linguistic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and differing communication styles can hinder effective collaboration (Thuesen, 2017). If these issues are not managed appropriately, the potential for division, inefficiency, and reduced team cohesion becomes significant.

Psychological safety is a well-researched concept that has proven to be essential in managing and leveraging diversity effectively (Edmondson and Brandsby, 2023). Coined by Amy Edmondson, psychological safety refers to a shared belief among team members that interpersonal risks—such as admitting mistakes, asking for help, or proposing unconventional ideas—will not result in negative consequences (Edmondson et al., 2016). In linguistically and culturally diverse teams, psychological safety plays an especially vital role. Teams with high psychological safety are more likely to embrace and utilize the diverse perspectives present within the group. Individuals in these teams feel comfortable voicing concerns, seeking clarification, and addressing potential misunderstandings, even when language proficiency or cultural norms vary. Research consistently shows that psychological safety is associated with better performance, enhanced learning opportunities, and greater innovation (Edmondson, 2023). Despite its recognized importance, psychological safety is not always prioritized in practice.

Hierarchies in linguistically diverse teams often remain rigid, with power dynamics discouraging open communication. In the study, employees were not encouraged to put forward their arguments or alternative suggestions and were unable to pursue them due to language barriers. Employees may fear being misunderstood or judged, particularly when they are required to operate in a language they are less proficient in. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate effort to foster trust and inclusivity within teams.

Another critical element for effective workplace dynamics is autonomy. It refers to the degree of freedom and responsibility employees have in their roles, allowing them to make decisions and take ownership of their work (Van Mierlo et al., 2006). Studies have long established that autonomy is a cornerstone of job satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being in the workplace (Hackman, Lawler and Oldham, 2015). For culturally and linguistically diverse teams, autonomy can serve as a means of empowering individuals to leverage their unique strengths and perspectives (Melinkava, 2023). By granting employees the ability to make decisions within clearly defined areas of responsibility, organizations can enhance engagement and reduce the frustrations often associated with rigid hierarchies.

However, as shown in the empirical part of this article, the practical implementation of autonomy frequently falls short due to divergent management philosophies and dysfunctional linguistic strategies in the lingua franca situation. The main aim of the group

sessions is to pass on information correctly. This reveals a dilemma of psychological safety in multilingual teams that Nurmi and Koroma (2022) also have shown as a limitation for innovation. Communication strategies such as searching for words, reformulations and simplifications lead to a feeling of psychological security on the one hand, but also to a slowdown and factual errors on the other. This could explain why information transfer is prioritised and more complex conversations take place outside of meetings.

Even in workplaces that explicitly promote autonomy, decision-making power often remains concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, particularly in teams with significant cultural and linguistic diversity (Méndez and Cañado, 2005). This disconnect between policy and practice not only undermines motivation but also prevents organizations from fully benefiting from the creativity and initiative of their employees (Chen et al., 2024).

Similar gaps between theory and practice are observable, for example, linguistic frameworks like the use of a lingua franca are intended to facilitate communication and bridge gaps between individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. In practice, however, these frameworks often fail as the present study shows. Employees may revert to their native languages or avoid complex discussions entirely to minimize the risk of miscommunication. This avoidance can lead to fragmented communication and reduced collaboration within teams because they solve their communication problems with their peer-group in the company or at home. Yanaprasart (2016b, p. 103) proposes therefore a “*multilingual model in action*” instead of the “*one language fits all*” approach, that can better “*value plurilingual speakers, recognize their achievements, strengthen their uniqueness for collective goals by providing them diverse, creative, hybrid forms of linguistic tools*”.

In summary, it can be observed that although the necessary frameworks, such as a shared language and the promotion of autonomy, appear to be in place, they are often not effectively implemented in multilingual teams. It seems that the theoretical prerequisites alone are insufficient to achieve the desired positive outcomes in practice.

We hypothesize that psychological safety plays a crucial role as a fundamental enabler. It has the potential to activate existing frameworks by fostering trust, facilitating communication, and enhancing collaboration. In an environment that provides psychological safety, team members feel encouraged to address uncertainties, take risks, and fully exercise their autonomy.

This approach could not only improve the implementation of these frameworks but also promote social sustainability within organizations in the long term. A work environment characterized by mutual respect, openness, and support serves as the foundation for sustainable and successful collaboration in diverse teams.

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# Knowledge Diplomacy: Geopolitical Activism through Virtual Exchange

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*Abstract: In a geo-politically polarized climate, nations continue to gain power through hostility, oppression, and bloodshed. War often leaves conquered landscapes in far worse conditions geographically, economically, socially, and politically. Alternatively, nations have opted to transform global conflict through cooperation and knowledge diplomacy efforts. In avoidance of military action, nations also use soft power mechanisms, engendering subtle persuasion on other nations through their attractive qualities seeking national gain and self-interest. Soft power, while effective, has been criticized as misleading due to the perception-based reliance and self-serving nature. Contemporaneously, knowledge diplomacy is sought by nations to strengthen their international relationships through conciliatory means where a nation's intentions and outcomes are cooperative minded. Knowledge diplomacy encompasses higher education, as well as many other sectors, to connect diverse actors across disciplines to collectively address global issues that can render mutually beneficial outcomes. A knowledge diplomacy framework promotes nations to collaborate, negotiate, and reach common ground, influencing behavior and commitment. As geopolitical tensions continue around the world, the role of higher education is critical in addressing conflict resolution strategies through knowledge diplomacy practices. Practical approaches in problem solving activities can equip future leaders with the skills to seek common ground through global cooperation. Project-based applied learning tasks infused into collaborative online international learning (COIL) activities can provide students with an opportunity to interact with diverse peers and explore potential solutions on local or global scales. Through COIL students can investigate the world beyond their familiar space and collectively examine issues that address one or more of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Students become cognizant that only through partnerships can these complex universal problems be addressed and solved. COIL activities foster intercultural competencies and 21st century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, acquiring empathy, and instilling effective and appropriate communication across cultures. Acquisition of these soft skills will enhance students' positive influence in the world contributing to knowledge diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** knowledge diplomacy, virtual exchange, international education, geopolitical activism, UN SDGs

## Introduction

Contemporary higher education plays an integral role in strengthening international allies garnered through a knowledge diplomacy approach in modern geopolitical spaces. Repertoires of power have been commonly perceived as military force and economic influence wielded for national advancement and global positioning. Threats to global hegemony through war, coercion, aggressive demands, and economic sanctions are often motivated by a nation's economic, political, or religious ideologies. Often such dissonance only worsens or perpetuates already existing problems in local and global spaces. Countries simply cannot afford to be isolated on the world stage where interdependence is necessary in an increasingly transparent world (Moise, 2015).

Historically, soft power has been viewed as a conscious effort to generate attraction in anticipation of unwitting global influence (Nye, 2008). It has been used to encourage countries to peacefully acquiesce in one's geopolitical demands through persuasive measures. Soft power, however, can be fundamentally at odds with collaborative and cooperative approaches

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in strengthening international geopolitical allies. A collective approach, identified as knowledge diplomacy, enables countries to build sustainable relationships through modes of negotiation, mediation, communication, and collaboration to achieve reciprocal success.

Geopolitical crisis and divisiveness encapsulated through social media has captured youth attention concomitantly with their ambition for change. Educators are key actors in international education and can integrate activities that center on such social tensions to garner discussion and reflection in hopes of mutual understanding and an aim for peace. Through technology educators connect and guide youth in diverse communities to address critical issues and promote future activist roles. Twenty-first century skills such as global citizenry, geo-intelligence, teamwork, problem solving, and collaboration are reinforced through hands-on activities centering on conflict resolution. Prioritizing initiatives that focus on global relations, human rights, social justice, and sustainable development around the world through modern geo-educational programs, such as collaborative international learning (COIL) can increase an equitable and inclusive culture of peace.

## Positioning in a Geopolitical Landscape

Geopolitics is the study of geography and its relation to economics, demographics, politics, and the foreign policy of a particular country in relation to its international counterparts. Geopolitics is used as a strategy for building and supporting international relationships by predicting behavior of international counterparts (Owens, 2015). Countries consider the interconnectedness of geography to position themselves to capitalize on their attraction.

Some examples of geopolitics include trade agreements, war treaties, territorial acknowledgements, climate agreements, and educational exchange opportunities both study abroad and virtual. In a geopolitical landscape, educational opportunities such as study abroad and virtual exchange collaborations can embolden global issues to create social impact. Global encounters such as war, climate conditions, and inequities are witnessed continuously through social media and digital sources creating the need to drive social change. How a country responds to such global crises plays a role in their (cyber) reputation and national appeal. As our world continues to get smaller through digital capabilities, education is paramount in addressing global concerns to expand the demand for knowledge diplomacy.

## Soft Power to Knowledge Diplomacy

The ability to shape world opinion is powerful. In the global realm, soft power serves to influence the attraction of others to take part in emulation, often promoted via culture, media, and education. If a country stands for values that others wish to imitate, it will cost less to persuade them. Soft power has historically been a favorable and necessary tool in geopolitical democracy and foreign relations. Soft power relies heavily on the magnitude of a country's perceived attractiveness to align its own global ranking and geopolitical power. Countries extrapolate their global appeal and presence as their voice to attract and persuade others with their culture, politics, and values. Yet, many countries are realizing that they cannot afford to act in isolation on global issues.

Recognizing that soft power measures lack the cooperative skills necessary to secure mutually beneficial achievements, countries utilize a knowledge diplomacy centered approach to maintain international ties. Knowledge diplomacy relies on reciprocal behaviors within conflict resolution and negotiation in efforts to obtain mutual benefits, notwithstanding national self-interest playing a key role. The benefits sought by international partners may



differ; but are incorporated in decisions through cooperation. A key goal of knowledge diplomacy is unity in relationships and the linking of common goals (Knight, 2020).

A tenet of soft power relies on a country's might via impressive economic and social stability, cultural attraction, or an abundance of natural resources to enhance greater appeal to other countries for competitive advantage. While this appeal can attract investors, consumers, and favor tourism, more often these benefits are not altruistic (Nye, 2021). In diplomatic contexts, the measure of attraction is extremely important as it affects a country's ability to influence the preferences and behaviors of other world leaders in this geopolitical-centric forum.

Nations utilize knowledge diplomacy and soft power efforts in international relations through higher education depending on situational factors, needs, and outcomes sought. For example, the soft power appeal stemming from a country's culture, politics, role in education, and foreign relations are interdependent on perception of those resources. These identified attributes contribute to the overall attractiveness (Knight, 2018).

Knowledge diplomacy strategies forgo perception, attraction, and persuasion to pursue common interests, collaboration, and the mitigation of conflict.

## Knowledge Diplomacy in Education

Globalization in the digital age is the catalyst for international innovation in higher education. Borderless countries posture in aim toward global solidarity that is increasingly accomplished with the approach of knowledge diplomacy. A robust international framework of relationships is integral to sustain global cooperation. Accordingly, a high-quality education infused with internationalization can cultivate a sustainable global society (Blessinger and Singh, 2023). Activities such as student exchange programs, study abroad, innovation, research, and virtual exchange can impact cross-cultural and political relations and person-to-person interactions enhancing knowledge diplomacy.

In terms of higher education, knowledge diplomacy considers the relationship between internationalization and education, research, and innovation fostered by collaborative mechanisms to secure international relationships (Knight, 2022). The process of knowledge diplomacy through education reinforces the strengths and skills of individuals and develops them to become global team players. Intercultural competence has become an instrumental means to effectively build international relationships to address global crises collectively (Deardoff and Hunter, 2006).

Moreover, student identity is developed by attaining global competence through active engagement and increased intercultural experiences. When students are exposed to other cultures, ideas, values, and diverse opinions, they consider their own position and self-understanding in these contexts. These experiences can inspire curiosity, open mindedness, and hopefully willingness to learn. When students realize differences in others, they can adjust their responses to treat others appropriately (Deardorff and Jones, 2012).

In study abroad, students are introduced to many manifestations of culture as expressed in Edward T. Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model (Hall, 2021). However, these characteristics lack depth for students to obtain a deeper critical consciousness of unobservable characteristics such as behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. Although students may be immersed in the external aspects of the culture, the experience is one-sided as visiting students are not able to reciprocate. In contrast, another method in which to incorporate international competencies is virtual exchange.

Efforts to increase student virtual mobility through contemporary technological enhanced methods of virtual learning are paramount to the institution's expansion and international persona, in economically stressed times. Increasing virtual exchange opportunities, designing virtual international internships, and creating international research experiences with students and institutions abroad all enhance the internationalization plan while increasing global allure (ACE, 2022).

## Internationalization of Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education has been redefined in response to the nature of contemporary geopolitical challenges. The role of internationalization in education has become essential to enhance globalized learning and to infuse international dimensions of teaching and learning through study abroad, faculty exchange, research, service learning, internships, and institutional partnerships. Educators have taken on roles to impart social responsibility, placing educational institutions as drivers of social transformation through activism and skill building (Wick & Willis, 2020). Social impact experiences infused in international education ignites student curiosity and equips students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students become inspired to actively participate in their communities and across borders. Activities that focus on social justice within the framework of international education prepare students to participate in social transformation as engaged, informed members of the global community. Although economics have always played a pivotal role in the need for internationalization, modern society's unpredictable, polarized, and volatile, nature urges the necessity for students to be equipped with the skills to function and adapt in diverse and complex settings (De Wit and Altbach, 2021).

Educators advocate for international education initiatives to include critical awareness of global issues, often highlighted by the UN 17 SDGs. These global challenges spark conversations and call for an exchange of ideas for potential strategies of equitable and inclusive change. Problem-solving experiences move far beyond the "favorite food" surface level cultural exchanges to connect social impact challenges within communities and abroad. International education simultaneously equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to drive social, political, and equitable future reform. International education exposes students to consider their own positionality in the world as future change agents.

Educational initiatives and policies on internationalization are essential to advance the global economy and geopolitical climate (Bailey, 2020). As nationalism and polarization continue to weaken international cooperation, hegemonic power structures strengthen and widen the global divide. These societal tensions spark much need for student debate, critical and deeper learning, and multi-perspective engagement. Global challenges that involve critically sensitive issues such as racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance contribute to students' mental health and daunting outlook in achieving an equitable, sustainable future. Educators play a critical role in raising these issues in the classroom to inspire hope, elicit viable solutions, and foster global acceptance. Complex and uncertain times only elevate the need for educators to guide students through social impact activities that underscore these relevant global and sociopolitical challenges (Bailey, 2020).

To facilitate international education that addresses critical and emotionally charged conflicts, educators require support and training. Access to culturally responsive training is necessary to facilitate discussion appropriately. In the absence of proper training educators often choose to ignore such "hot button" topics altogether (Bailey, 2020). Professional development in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), should be available and complement

international education initiatives. Through DEI training, educators can address systemic discriminatory practices within institutions that perpetuate the subordination of marginalized populations. These crucial conversations are necessary to understand and destabilize the root cause of discriminatory practices at home and abroad. Including social impact experiences that address these challenges create opportunities for student agency in the global community. Students acquire empathy through examination of social, political, and environmental challenges that affect society collectively, as well as individually. Students' social competencies are reinforced through culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies. Inclusive practices such as creating a sense of belonging in a classroom community increase student engagement and participation. Internationalized activities, whether conducted virtually or in-person as in study abroad, prepare students to navigate in a diverse, yet interconnected and interdependent world.

International educational initiatives created to foster equity include the decolonization of western higher education. Decolonization can be achieved by vetting curriculum and transforming pedagogical practices. Course content should reflect the voices and experiences of the students within the classroom community. This includes ensuring the inclusion of marginalized perspectives and contributions from diverse authors. Decolonization of higher education also includes examination of the relationship between the global north and global south. In order to strengthen the global north-global south relationship the curriculum and pedagogy requires transformation and reciprocal inclusivity. Acknowledging the global divide further addresses western bias and dominance in higher education and the need for transformation (Tight, M., 2024). At this pivotal juncture where cooperation is crucial, educators can implement global challenges in intercultural experiences to transform students into global citizens for themselves, their community, and for those suffering around the world.

## Virtual Exchange and Knowledge Diplomacy

Academic and cultural virtual exchange collaborations are paramount in advancing international student mobility, equity, and intercultural communications. These increasingly sustainable international relationships connect peers from around the world and offer a positive introduction to future global relations, geopolitical outcomes, and foreign diplomacy through collaborative efforts (Wojciuk, 2018). Virtual exchange is noted to be a viable extension of public diplomacy, soft power, and knowledge diplomacy in foreign affairs (Virtual Exchange, 2018). Addressing global crises through a knowledge diplomacy lens within virtual exchange collaborations fosters interconnectedness and cooperation between students, institutions, and nations.

Virtual exchange facilitates expansion of international partnerships and widens cultural and educational appeal for participating students and countries. Virtual exchange collaborations become microcosms; unique learning societies composed of multicultural participants, guided to discuss possible innovative methods for a sustainable future (Blessinger and Singh, 2023). International knowledge diplomacy is advanced through developing student-to-student relationships. These relationships have the ability to evolve into sustainable bonds with a greater effect in enhancing future cooperation among nations (Wojciuk, 2018).

Virtual exchange incurs minimal costs and contributes toward projecting legitimate internationalization, co-opting, and support while enhancing the nation's allure and knowledge diplomacy. This learning paradigm enables inclusivity and culturally responsive teaching methods since by its very nature it focuses on intercultural interactions and understanding. It

can be implemented in any learning mode and developed in any discipline and is often interdisciplinary. Through online interactions and applied learning experiences, 21st Century digital and soft skills can be developed. Virtual exchange aligns with Diversity and Global Learning, which is one of the 11 high-impact practices established by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2023).

## Knowledge Diplomacy, Education, and Geopolitical Activism

Addressing one or more of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) is the project-based learning activity implemented in many virtual exchange collaborations. These global goals were launched in 2015 with an optimistic date of attainment of 2030 (United Nations). However, geopolitical conflicts and a global pandemic have disrupted progress.

As the overarching goals of the UN SDGs are focus on people, planet, and prosperity, engagement in collaborative projects offers students the chance to contextualize global issues with their peers and develop creative resolutions to worldwide problems. The ubiquity of the Internet, social media, and a plethora of apps make it easy for students to engage with diverse populations within the global landscape. Young people must acquire the knowledge and skills to understand, engage, analyze, and interact appropriately within global communities (Wierenga and Guevara, 2013). Virtual exchange empowers students to advance from a basic awareness of global challenges to personal involvement and perhaps guided action (Wierenga and Guevara, 2013).

With guidance from educators through participation in virtual exchange experiences, students are provided with opportunities to collectively raise awareness of contemporary issues such as social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, climate change and sustainability, the economy, inflation, and notably the UN 17 SDGs. These collaborations serve as an integral part of a country's political toolbox fostering knowledge diplomacy.

## Virtual Exchange Platforms

Two widely known virtual exchange platforms that presenters have implemented include Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge.

The State University of New York (SUNY) pioneered "COIL" collaborative online international learning in the early 2000s enabling students and faculty to engage in an international experience. Partnering bulletins issued quarterly in conjunction with partnering fairs provide faculty with an opportunity to share their profiles and examine the profiles and projects proposed by other faculty who are potential partners. Faculty attend training workshops, and partners work together in planning, designing, and delivering the collaborations. Collaborations should be a minimum of four to six weeks or an entire semester. Length is just one of many decisions that faculty partners must discuss before embarking on a collaboration. Other challenges are associated with the academic calendar and holidays. Some other considerations include shared learning outcomes, grading options, rubrics, potential learning management systems, and Apps or technological tools for communication and delivering the final team projects. Commitment by partners is a necessary component for success.

Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge is supported by the Stevens Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Department of State, governments in the MENA region, and

private foundations. The program is administered by the Aspen Institute, implemented by IREX, and supports career readiness for students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the U.S, Iraq, and Jordan (Global Solutions). Since this is an eight-week competition, IREX provides the challenge prompt, supporting curriculum, Slack channel, weekly milestones, and deliverables. Faculty partners are assigned, attend training workshops, and communicate regularly to ensure that the curriculum is being followed and that deadlines and expectations are being met.

In the remainder of this paper, COIL virtual exchange collaborations with institutional partners from Colombia, Mexico, and Morocco as well as Global Solutions collaborations with partners from Iraq and Jordan will be described.

### ***Mexico and the U.S.***

Virtual exchange can be conducted through cross disciplines and expose students to diverse interests. Rockland Community College, a two-year institution in New York, partnered with Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico, a four-year institution for a six-week collaboration. Thirty-seven students in total collaborated in a project-based learning virtual exchange. All participating students were members of an active class for credit in their institution. Engineering students in Mexico, paired with students in the U.S. who were studying law. The professors co-developed converging course learning outcomes and designed icebreakers, project requirements, and deadlines in a cultural, legal, and environmentally themed project to meet diverse goals of the disciplines. Grading was performed independently by professors. A Facebook private group was used to post final projects.

Cultural awareness was highlighted through student engagement via an in-depth cultural interview. Students discussed their ethnicity, family structure, work, daily life, religion, preferences, and values. To accomplish varied course learning objectives, the engineering students developed e-gadgets and toys while the U.S. students designed the corresponding legal documents involved for patenting their electronic inventions. This task engendered skills for both disciplines. The engineering students were able to utilize international consumer preferences in the development of their electronics while the U.S. students conducted legal research and writing, as well as comprehension of U.S. patent law for foreign inventors.

Deeper engagement was evidenced as the students in Mexico interviewed students in the U.S. to acquire shopping preferences and raise awareness of electronic waste. The teams discussed the detrimental effects on the environment from improper electronic waste disposal.

Findings revealed that students appreciated the supplemental topics introduced beyond the scope of their discipline. Students in the U.S. gained awareness of environmental challenges, while the students in Mexico experienced firsthand what it would be like to interact with a legal team to patent an invention. This project-based learning experience promoted awareness of UN SDG 3 Good Health as health can be impacted by breathing in pollution and harmful excess gas, such as methane, due to improper electronic waste disposal. UN SDG 6 Clean Water was highlighted when students discussed the impact of improper disposal of electronic waste in waterways thus causing water contamination and negatively affecting drinking water, crop production, and spread of disease. These challenges also negatively impact sustainable cities, UN SDG 11 Sustainable Cities creating financial hardship to invest in environmental sustainability. Lastly, UN SDG 13 Climate Change, UN SDG 14 Life Below Water, and UN SDG 15 Life Below Land all promote the need for effective electronic waste management practices such as reusing and recycling to minimize the negative impact on the



environment and global climate change. Identifying and discussing the identified UN SDGs can contribute to the development of global citizenry and future global leaders.

### ***Morocco and the U.S.***

Social media can be utilized to advance social and political activism, including radical propaganda. In this collaboration, entitled Protest for Action with social media, intercultural teams examined the influence of social media as a decentralized mechanism to rally youth for activism and social change. Rockland Community College students partnered with Mohammed One University, Morocco, where 38 students in total collaborated in a project-based learning activity for six weeks. The students in the U.S. were members of an active class for credit, while the students from Morocco volunteered to participate in the experience. The collaboration consisted of students from the U.S. who were enrolled in an Intro to Multiculturalism course paired with students in Morocco who were enrolled in an English course. Both professors participated in the Stevens Initiative (<https://www.stevensinitiative.org/>) in 2016, a grant providing the opportunity and funding for the professors to meet in person to collaborate and develop a virtual exchange. The professors designed the icebreaker, project requirements, technology tools, and deadlines. Grading was performed independently by participating professors.

This collaboration involved a comparison of the international phenomenon known as the Black Lives Matter movement and the wave of protests known as the Arab Spring uprising. Both grassroot movements utilized social media effectively to raise awareness, organize, and sustain the momentum. The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 and was reignited in 2020 after the death of George Floyd, by a Minneapolis police officer. It became the largest movement to demand police accountability and racial justice. The movement captured the attention of millions of supporters through the horrific video of the murder shared on social media platforms. Similarly, the Arab Spring movement began in 2011 after the death of a 26-year-old Tunisian fruit seller. Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after mistreatment by government officials, sparking a revolution. This act triggered uprisings that reverberated throughout North Africa and the Middle East in demand of freedom and dignity. Social media became the impetus to accelerate this movement through images and videos shared beyond Tunisia for the rest of the world to witness the harsh government reaction to the protests.

For the collaboration, bi-national teams deconstructed the movements to compare the method of organization used in gatherings, strategy, outcome, successes, and ultimate failures. Students examined the role of social media as a significant strategy to organize, raise awareness, and to inspire youth. Groups were required to post a PowerPoint or video on the Padlet wall.

The findings revealed that many students in the U.S. had never heard of the Arab Spring protests. Student reflections revealed that the movements did not accomplish every demand made, yet awareness of important human rights came to the forefront. Students agreed that there should be increased activities for youth to deter them from participating in future radical revolutions.

In this collaboration, cultural appreciation was ascertained through the icebreaker, a task of sharing a cultural image on the Padlet wall. Students were also required to engage in discussion reflecting on the cultural images posted which sparked friendly conversation. This collaboration highlighted several UN SDGs. UN SDG 5 Gender Equality was addressed as equality was prevalent as the basis for both movements. Further, UN SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities was discussed as it is a continuing challenge in both countries. Lastly, UN SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, was addressed through discussion seeking equitable

human rights through protests. Through virtual exchange activities knowledge diplomacy is advanced as students become knowledgeable about circumstances beyond their immediate surroundings. Students recognized and discussed the need for global collaboration to achieve the UN SDGs by the projected date of 2030.

### ***Colombia and the U.S.***

Peace can be fostered through global citizens. As students increasingly become aware of global crises, they are using their voices to raise awareness of issues they are passionate about. Promoting peace in educational activities equips students with skills to prevent conflict and avoid resorting to violent resolutions.

The peacebuilding project was designed to raise awareness of an international issue that was relevant in Colombia and in the U.S. Bi-national teams developed an achievable strategy to raise awareness about the selected local, national, or global common concern. Rockland Community College partnered with SENA, Colombia, a vocational institution, where 48 students in total collaborated in a project-based learning activity designed by the partnering professors respectively. All participating students were members of an active class for credit in their institution. The professors collaborated virtually and designed the six-week peace building project requirements, icebreakers, cultural activity, technology tools, and deadlines. Grading was performed independently by professors.

In fostering equity, student groups were able to choose their issue and the method by which to deliver the final project. The choice of topics ranged from gun violence, poverty, hunger, equal education, bullying, and domestic violence. For the deliverable, students decided on choices of designing a poster, creating an educational PowerPoint presentation, video, or developing an organizational plan for a protest or fundraiser.

Positive educational experiences offered in virtual exchange shape student identity development, build learning societies, and enhance future global leaders, while increasing cultural appreciation of one another. The students gained empathy, compassion, and perspective of student life in another country. UN SDG 1 No Poverty, UN SDG 2 Zero Hunger, UN SDG 4 Quality Education, and UN SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions were addressed by student groups individually as their specific chosen topic via PowerPoint designed to raise awareness and achieve peace. All presentations/deliverables were posted to the Padlet wall. Students expanded their knowledge beyond the scope of their chosen topic through the requirement to comment on two fellow group projects on the Padlet wall. Student comments revealed that many were unaware of the UN SDGs. Also, students realized many international challenges are similar around the world.

### ***Iraq and the U.S.***

In most collaborations, students from the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region are usually more familiar with U.S. culture rather than the opposite. This observation was noted in a collaboration in which 14 U.S. students from Rockland Community College enrolled in a classroom-based Principles of Marketing Honors course partnered with students from a university in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Upon successful completion of the course, the U.S. students were granted three credits while the Iraqi students were not enrolled in a class but volunteered to participate in this Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge. Students were charged with addressing a problem relating to one of the first four United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 1 No Poverty, Goal 2 Zero Hunger, Goal 3 Good Health and Well Being, Goal 4 Quality Education). Through extensive discussions in country groups and in

Zoom bi-national meetings, students decided to focus their efforts on a project relating to UN SDG 3 - Good Health and Well Being.

Goal 3 is undoubtedly a very broad goal, which is appropriate since the status and standards of health and well-being differ around the world. This variance became apparent during the global pandemic in terms of access to medical care and vaccinations. The global pandemic also reminded us of our humanity and interconnectedness as we all faced challenges--some more severe than others.

Through sharing of ideas and issues observed in both countries, students chose autism as the problem to be addressed. Students crafted a problem statement --to ensure that children around the world with autism could lead healthy, happy, and productive lives. Students created a prototype--an illustrated, informative children's book called *I Don't Think My Brother Likes Me*. Although the book was written for children to help them better understand their siblings on the autism spectrum, the book served as a resource for parents and/or caregivers. Information on identification of the early signs of autism plus where and how to seek proper diagnosis and treatment was included. Throughout their research and engagement in the project, as well as an informative session with an autism guest speaker, students were exposed to different perspectives on the topic resulting in a more developed sense of empathy.

Besides engagement in the actual project, students conversed on a Slack channel to become acquainted with their partners. Photos and conversations relating to everyday life and culture were exchanged. However, despite the geographical distance and cultural differences between the two countries, students concluded that they had more in common with their partners than originally thought. A common bond was created with the realization that good health and wellbeing is not the province of any one country but a universal desire and need--one that should be available to all people everywhere. Besides the weekly tasks required for posting in Slack in accordance with the competition and the ultimate deliverables (business model concept paper and 5-minute video), U.S. students prepared a reflection paper. The entire project required not only in-class activities but outside work such as small-group team meetings. Therefore, 35 percent of the final grade was assigned to this active learning team-based project. All students completed the project successfully and discovered skills that they were not aware they possessed such as leadership, teambuilding, creativity, and web development. Here is one student reflection: "The most interesting and useful learning moment for me was being able to build something of our own, for the betterment of society from the ground up. All of the components in this project were very important and every team had a specific goal to help make the prototype and the business concept the best it can be. Overall, it shows the importance of teamwork; and in order to become successful, you need a good team. In addition, anything is possible, and it doesn't matter where you are in the world to make a difference."

Autism is a developmental and neurological condition that occurs in individuals in both countries. By working together toward a common goal and sharing knowledge, students can become better acquainted with the problem and improve the lives of children and families through the sharing of knowledge. Education is a powerful tool that has the potential to change lives.

### ***Jordan and the U.S.***

This Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge collaboration was awarded second place out of 27 teams competing from institutions in Iraq, Jordan, and the U.S. The judges were highly impressed with the business model concept paper and the 5-minute video--the required deliverables. They commented positively on the use of captions displayed on the video, which

assisted any non-English speaking viewers. The bi-national team consisted of 21 students enrolled in a three-credit asynchronous Principles of Marketing Honors course at Rockland Community College. They worked with 10 students from a university in Amman, Jordan. These 10 Jordanian students applied and were accepted to participate in the Challenge but would not be graded since they were not enrolled in a class. However, the same grading scheme of 35 percent was used for the U.S. students as mentioned in the previous Global Solutions collaboration with Iraq.

Through their joint efforts starting with interviewing end users and empathizing with their needs, students discussed and proposed a smart technology-based agricultural solution. The prototype developed was appropriately named M.I.S.T. (Meyah Irrigation System Technology) and was conceived to help farmers optimize their utilization of water for irrigation through coded algorithms, which dispensed the exact amount of water needed with no waste.

This project was aligned not only with Goal 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation - but also with several other UN SDGs as water is a precious resource. Water is a basic human right necessary for the well-being and survival of all living organisms. However, according to the World Economic Forum, over 40 percent of the world's population is affected by water scarcity rendering this a critical global issue (Rees, 2023). Even though Jordan and the U.S. have different needs and resources and are very dissimilar in area, implementation of the proposed device could be beneficial for adaptation in any country. Each country's self-interests may not align exactly but working together to address a global problem leads to reciprocity and a win/win situation for all--an expression of knowledge diplomacy. Here is a reflection from one of the students: "I had a great experience working with Jordanian students and being able to create a whole prototype based on an idea. This project has made me consider learning more about international business and how businesses grow from different parts of the world. I would love to visit Jordan one day and many countries around the world to learn about their cultures. I would love to explore other areas of sustainability and how to implement sustainability into businesses. In terms of skills, I would like to explore Slack and the business model more!"

### ***Morocco and the U.S.***

This COIL collaboration entitled Communicating Interculturally Through Technology involved 17 students enrolled in a three-credit asynchronous Business Communications class at Rockland Community College working with 39 students from an oral communications class at Mohammed One University in Morocco. The focus of this project was on development of intercultural communication and cultural intelligence skills. Through the input of both professors, a "COIL" syllabus, which was in addition to the standard course syllabus, was developed and shared with the students. Besides the jointly developed COIL module learning outcomes, project tasks, and calendar, grading information was included on this syllabus. Although instructors discussed grading and usually allocated the same percentages to the collaboration, grading was done separately by instructors. The tasks completed by the U.S. students were broken down and counted in various categories such as discussion, oral communication, and assignments.

In the Icebreaker Activity, students were introduced to Hall's Cultural Iceberg (Hall, 2021). Although students focused on observable aspects of culture such as food, holidays, language, music, places of interest, and more--essentially those aspects positioned at the tip of the iceberg--this Icebreaker was preparation for exploring other cultural aspects not as easily observable. Through team dialogue and assignments on a Padlet wall, deeper aspects relating to values, attitudes, behavior, and ideas on various topics were revealed.

By examination of the theories espoused by Hofstede in his Six Dimensions of Culture and Hall's Intercultural Model of Communication, students identified aspects of their culture, which in some instances they were not consciously aware of (Hall, 2021). However, when these aspects were perceived through the lens of a different culture, they were acknowledged to be accurate representations. A Country Comparison Tool enabled students to examine Hofstede's Dimensions in contrast to their partner's culture. Reactions and findings were discussed in mixed teams accompanied by sharing of actual cultural examples to support responses. Here is one student's reflection: "Overall I am quite impressed with our Moroccan friends, even though they come from very different cultural backgrounds, we aren't that different. I hope just like we were able to see our common interest and not focus on what divides us and get along, I hope we as the next generation can see that politically and grow together instead of having conflict."

One of the central tenets of knowledge diplomacy is collaboration enacted in a horizontal, cooperative, and collaborative relationship, an environment conducive to virtual exchange. Domination does not exist, only learning about one's own identity and others and working collectively in a reciprocal mode for the common good.

## Reflections and Assessment

Student reflections were obtained through a survey and discussion board posts in Padlet. The reflections suggested that virtual exchange enhanced student cultural knowledge as students acquired empathy and were able to diffuse stereotypes. Comments revealed that most students were unaware of the UN SDGs. Many students revealed that they had not participated in an international virtual exchange prior to this experience. The reflections also indicated that overall students enjoyed the collaborative process and enjoyed discussion with international peers. In addition, students identified the challenges they experienced such as time differences and contacting group members.

Authors realize that a formalized assessment is necessary to determine precisely how the learned skills are being utilized in students' future experiences involving career and/or international relationships. Assessing virtual exchange can be a difficult endeavor due to its heterogeneous nature, as virtual exchanges are not often structured in a similar manner (O'Dowd et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, education is recognized as a high-yielding mechanism of knowledge diplomacy in geopolitical space. Cooperation will be pivotal in accomplishing critical global concerns. International higher education will continue to transform and adapt to meet the needs of an interconnected global society. International educational initiatives such as virtual exchange will unite multicultural students from around the world and develop future cooperative leaders. Globalization, technological advancements, and COVID-19 have created the need for contemporary youth to acquire 21st Century hands-on coping skills. Modern dynamics of accessible information require youth to have the ability to understand, process, and contemplate global crises. Virtual exchange offers an equitable, inclusive, and neutral space for budding youth activists to explore resolutions and promote awareness of the UN 17 SDGs. Virtual exchange will continue to increase international appealability through cultural acceptance and compassion while promoting global peace and global cooperation.



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# Inclusive Communication and the TOPOI-model: Beyond intercultural communication and competence: ‘Cultures don’t meet, people do.’

Edwin Hoffman,<sup>3</sup> Austria

*In this article, I raise the question of what is meant by intercultural communication and intercultural competence and what kind of application-oriented approach could effectively support people in communicating, interacting, and collaborating with people from different national, ethnic, or religious backgrounds? The starting point of the answer is that widely used theories by e.g. Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Richard Lewis, and Erin Meyer form a risky approach to intercultural communication because of their culturalist nature. Their culturalist approach encourages learners to ‘zoom out’ away from the concrete individuals in an interaction and objectify them into schematic cultures and stereotypes in order to explain differences and misunderstandings. Inclusive communication goes beyond the culturalist character of intercultural communication: it encourages the opposite by zooming in on the encounter between unique individuals who are connected with others at an intersection of identities and embedded in diverse social-cultural contexts.*

*Keywords:* Culturalist approach, Inclusive communication, Intercultural communication, Intercultural competence, Diversity, Inclusive competence, TOPOI-model.

## The Risks of a Culturalist Approach

A culturalist approach zooms out (Bolten, 2014) from a concrete interpersonal interaction towards schematic cultures and cultural dimensions: national, collectivist/individualist, linear-active/multi-active/reactive, shame/guilt, etc. The people involved in a communicative interaction are reduced to stereotypes of schematic cultures. Any difference that arises is called a cultural difference, the cause of arising communication problems is explained by the differences between schematic cultures, and knowledge of these differences is seen as the necessary intercultural competence.

An example is the case study in which a team leader seeks Erin Meyer’s advice on the contradictions in his international team between the Chinese and the Japanese team members regarding time management and decision-making. Using her Culture map (2014) Meyer first explains to the team leader that Japan is a society with consensual decision-making and has a linear-time culture. In China, on the other hand, decisions are most often made by the boss in a top-down fashion, and China has a flexible time culture. Given these differences, Meyer says, it’s understandable that the Japanese and the Chinese are having difficulties working together. She concludes her advice: “*Can the problem be solved? Absolutely. The next step in improving these dynamics is to increase the awareness of your team members about how (the national, E.H.) culture impacts their effectiveness.*” (Meyer, 2014) But Alfred Korzybski already warned with his famous statement ‘*the map is not the territory*’ (1994, p. 58.) that the language that describes reality is not the actual reality itself, and similarly Meyer’s (cultural) map is not the actual interaction and the individuals involved.

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With sincere appreciation and recognition for Geert Hofstede's indispensable contribution to the intercultural field, a culturalist approach was reflected in his practical application of the theory as well. The cause of the outburst of anger by Marcus, an Indonesian manager, because of an amusingly intended accusation by his Dutch colleague Frans, Hofstede explained as follows *"In Indonesia, where status is sacred, an insult is always taken literally, Frans should have known that."* (Hofstede, 1997, p. 296) Later in 2023 Bas Bredenoord, HR Director at Mars International Travel Retail, writes *"They (Hofstede Insights, E.H.) also developed a very practical step-by-step approach for any cultural challenges they might face: - Is there a **national culture** (in bold E.H.) at play here? - Hold your judgement. - Go into the science. Use the tools available to you and develop a strategy to approach the challenge."* (The Culture Factor Group, 2023)

## Problematising Cultural Differences

Instead of seeing encounters between people with different national, ethnic, and religious origins as a potential enrichment, as an opportunity to learn from each other; the emphasis in a culturalist approach on intercultural competence and the importance of 'culture-specific knowledge', and 'deep cultural knowledge' (Ilie, 2019) problematizes these encounters and makes them seem almost impossible to overcome. A quote of Hofstede illustrates this: *"Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are at best a nuisance and often a disaster"* (ITIM, 2009 in Fang, 2012). But cases from managerial practice show that management techniques or approaches can be learned and transferred often through incidents, conflicts, or cultural negotiations (Fang, 2012). And in the daily living and working together of ordinary people in neighbourhoods and at work, it turns out that cultural differences can be connected and can enrich life views, knowledge, practices, and identities even without any training or study in intercultural competence. Philip Roth (1992) writes about the everyday realities of living together in American cities: *"The workplace - the brewery, the shipyard, the factory, the vegetable market, the construction site, the haberdashery stall - was not necessarily the best place to free oneself from discrimination, to expand one's relationships, or to acquire skills to build new cultural patterns that enhance life and replace the old ones that are suddenly meaningless and paralyzing. Yet, this is where totally new American identities were born. They were not shaped by schools, teachers, or textbooks. (...). They were born spontaneously out of the harsh realities of the city."*

The necessity of having cultural knowledge in order to be interculturally competent throws professionals off balance and makes them insecure. When a very experienced Dutch job mediator asked how he could find out about the motivation of a Somali job seeker, he was totally astonished when he was asked in return whether he had tried to simply ask. The mediator had believed that his 'Dutch direct, individualistic' communication style of *asking* would not correspond with the supposedly indirect, collectivistic communication style of Somalis.

The culturalists themselves often warn that their comparative cultural dimensions involve generalisations, intended only to describe collectives such as national societies, groups of managers and cannot be translated to unique individuals and their communication. But in the practical examples provided by the aforementioned authors and in the applications of their theories by many trainers, consultants, lecturers, and other authors, one can see how easily and quickly they switch from the collective, group level to the individual, interpersonal level.

Now, the idea is that at least cultural dimensions or scales are useful for making people aware of possible differences and are an easy introduction to concepts that sensitise people to

the importance of intercultural competence. But even then, there is a danger of interpreting differences in communication solely in cultural terms. It is an irresponsible simplification of the complexity of interaction processes, and people of different nationalities, ethnicities, or faiths are still seen as 'different' and 'foreign', highlighting that intercultural competence is required to engage effectively with them.

## Inclusive Communication

A proposal for a working alternative - hereby also gladly put up for discussion - is an inclusive approach to intercultural communication.

### 1. The principles of recognised equality and recognised diversity

Inclusive communication is based on the principles of *recognised equality* and *recognised diversity*. In general, the communication between people, regardless of their background, is always the communication between human beings (recognised equality), who are unique individuals connected with others and embedded in diverse socio-cultural contexts. They have multiple identities and their own life stories. Individuals' communication is an interaction between their unique personalities, physical and mental conditions, biographies, the unique processing of the diversity of cultural offerings in their lives, and the specific situational context in which the interaction takes place (recognised diversity).

Furthermore, it is the context that then determines how to approach people inclusively: depending on the context, people are first and foremost e.g. employees, team members, managers, learners, parents, patients, citizens, inhabitants, clients, and so on (recognised equality), each with their own specific personal characteristics, competences, motives, needs, emotions, and values (recognised diversity). In the Netherlands, an employer was asked by an employee if he could get Friday off to go to the mosque. The employer responded by saying, "*That's not possible. Here in the Netherlands, we go to church on Sundays!*" From an inclusive approach, the employer should see the man as an employee (recognised equality) - and not a Muslim - who has a particular wish (recognised diversity), as any employee can have. For example, other employees might want to enjoy a long weekend and take the Friday off.

### 2. Humanising 'the others'

An inclusive approach normalises communication with people of a different nationality, ethnicity, or faith: communication with 'the foreign other' is humanised: 'The others' are not another human species for whom a separate intercultural competence, a manual, is needed. They are fellow human beings, as layered and complex as we ourselves are (Bennett, 2020). From a systemic perspective, every person takes part in different collectives (social groups) and successful meaningful interactions, each of which is characterised by a certain culture. Here, culture is meant as a social order of habits - language, social practices, beliefs, norms, values - to make meaningful interaction possible (Blommaert, 2015). Culture ranges from a successful meaningful first encounter between two people, to social groups - e.g. families, groups of friends, teams, departments of an organisation, clubs, music fans, sports fans - to highly developed, large-scale societies: cities, regions, countries, continents. Thus, there are as many cultures as there are successful interactions and social groups, all of which can shape people; not just a national society or a national culture.

A common objection is that the cultures of other social groups are subcultures and less decisive than national cultures, which are supposed to impact people the most. However, the story of Vedran Frankovic from the Croatian province of Istria illustrates how the influence of national cultures can be subordinated to the subcultural influence of a village, family, and



profession in a person's daily life. Vedran's grandfather, born at the beginning of the 20th century, was a winegrower. He had never left his village in Istria and had nevertheless lived in four countries, but this had little influence on him as a person and in his daily life. During his grandfather's lifetime, Istria belonged to four different states: Austria (Habsburg monarchy), Italy, Yugoslavia, and Croatia.

### ***3. Multicollectivity, multiculturality and multiple identities.***

Since people are part of different collectives, each of which develops its own culture to a greater or lesser extent, each person is characterised by multicollectivity and multiculturality. Moreover, everyone can derive a particular identity from a social group and thus has multiple identities. Cultural differences can therefore occur in any communication, even between people of the same group (e.g. a family, because of the unique multiple identity, multicollectivity and multiculturality of each family member). Or put another way: Communication with anyone, regardless of background, is not a different kind of communication but always 'ordinary', interpersonal communication: *'Cultures don't meet, people do'* (Hoffman 1996, 1998).

### **Diversity**

Differences that may emerge in communication are not always cultural - arising from the habits of a collective - but can have diverse causes: personal, social, psychological, physical, socio-economic, legal, spiritual, power inequality, political, organisational, etc. Two examples: In a job interview, an employer asked an applicant (female, wearing a hijab) if he could offer her coffee. The applicant replied: *'No, thank you,'* to which the employer immediately responded with: *"Oh yes, of course, I completely forgot that it is Ramadan. You are not allowed to drink or eat anything until sunset."* *"No, no,"* said the applicant, *"I don't drink coffee, but please tea if possible."* Members of a team commented that their (Chinese) colleague Alden never spoke up. In team meetings they at some point told Alden that he was *"really Chinese"* and made comments like *"I know he is from a shy culture..."* Alden pointed out that his colleagues were partly responsible for the problem because they often spoke too fast, used slang terms, and didn't take the time to listen or to explain things properly (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019). By interpreting Alden's behaviour using stereotypical ideas about Chinese culture, team members did not see Alden as a person, a teammate (recognised equality) who has his own reasons for his behaviour, such as situational factors. They also didn't see their own part in the communication problem (recognised diversity).

It can be concluded that people are simultaneously part of numerous collectives with diverse cultural habits, and each person processes these in a completely unique way in interaction with their own individual biological and biographical preconditions. While it is possible to infer from individuals' collective ties what cultural habits, they are *familiar* with and what patterns of behaviour or concepts of thought they may know, it remains completely open what individuals *make* of these: what ideas, opinions, and practices they infer for themselves (Rathje 2009).

In addition, in their interactions with others, other unpredictable, non-cultural factors may influence their behaviour as can be seen above in Alden's example.

### **The Essence of Inclusive Communication: attentive, mindful communication**

The essence of inclusive communication is attentive, mindful communication that allows people to present themselves as they wish. In the spirit of Andries Baart's presence theory

(2000, p. 21), the question for professionals is: "*Can you allow the other, the strange, can it really exist and play a role in the way you interact with the other?*" That question is confrontational because it replaces the prior intercultural competence - the '*culture-specific knowledge*', and '*deep cultural knowledge*' - with '*competenceless competence*' (in German: '*Kompetenzlosigkeitskompetenz*', Mecheril 2013, p. 16)) and '*cultural humility*' (Hook et al, 2013). This means having the courage to embark on an on-the-spot adventure with the other person and adopting an attitude of openness, curiosity, empathy, and critical self-reflection. It means relinquishing the claim to perfection: admitting one's own ignorance, uncertainties, and contradictions and saying goodbye to the idea of having to and being able to function perfectly competently. It means accepting that interactions are complex and unpredictable, that the situational context and the person may be *differently* different than expected. It also means recognising that knowledge and action are embedded in power structures. It is especially important that professionals reflect on their own position of power and recognise it critically in their own actions. Self-reflexivity increases the uncertainty of a person's own actions because they are constantly questioned. Tolerating this uncertainty should be understood and practised as normality; it is part of a professional attitude. (Brunner & Ivanova, 2015, pp. 23-28)

### Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Competence?

The aforementioned then raises the question of what do we still consider to be the meaning of intercultural communication and intercultural competence? When people share a particular culture, social cohesion is created. This cohesion arises from the familiarity of differences. There is empirical evidence that the cohesion of corporate cultures is not necessarily linked to homogeneity - in other words, to everybody having the same habits and thinking and acting the same - but rather to the creation of normality through the familiarity of differences (cf. Rathje 2004). It can be inferred that if culturality is characterised by the familiarity of differences, interculturality, by contrast, is characterised by the unfamiliarity or strangeness of differences. Intercultural communication can then be understood as communication in which one or more people involved have an experience of strangeness because of unfamiliar, unknown differences of any kind (Rathje 2009; Bolten 2007; Hoffman & Verdooren 2018). For example, person A wants to shake hands with person B as a greeting, but person B greets in a way that person A is not familiar with. Or during a conversation, one conversation partner constantly tries to look the other in the eye, but the latter experiences this as strange and impolite.

Inclusive competence - a more appropriate name for intercultural competence because differences are not only cultural - is then the ability to transform an experience of strangeness because of unfamiliar, unknown differences of any kind, into normality and familiarity and thus (re)create a connection, a basis for (further) communication, cooperation, or living together (Rathje 2009; Hoffman & Verdooren 2018).

### Key Components of Inclusive Competence

The key components of inclusive competence are not '*culture-specific knowledge*' and '*deep cultural knowledge*' but the general attitudes and skills a person needs to overcome differences, misunderstandings, and conflicts in communication with anyone. Certain familiar elements that are useful in all kinds of communications are key to inclusive competence. Some of these elements are respect, openness, curiosity, critical self-reflection, flexibility, active listening. There is also a subtle sort of communicative competence that is called in Japanese '*Kuuki-wo-yomu*', which means '*reading the air or the atmosphere*' (Yuhee, Soyeon & Tomohiko, 2023;

Kimura, 2010). This competence is especially useful in situations where people use a high-context, implicit style of communication. It involves reading between the lines and being sensitive to the situational settings, to mutual relationships, the atmosphere, people's unspoken intentions and emotions of those involved. Apart from these qualities, there are more specific components of inclusive competence:

- Unlabeling people: Approaching others as unique individuals connected to others, with multiple identities, with their own (life)stories and embedded in diverse social-cultural contexts. Somebody said: *"If you put my background (a label, E.H.) in the foreground, you don't see me."* (Thanks to Stephan Hild).

Being aware that identities can shift unintentionally during a conversation or can be shifted consciously. A student of Afro-Surinamese background at a Dutch university smoked at a place where smoking was forbidden. The Dutch ('white') janitor warned the student, who resisted a little bit. Then the janitor said to the student: *"You have to adapt like all others."* The student reacted furiously to these words. The student and the janitor had always had a good relationship with each other, and both were surprised by what happened. Afterwards, the incident was discussed with them. The student said: *"I don't know what happened to me, but the janitor's words 'You have to adapt' suddenly made me feel like a black Surinamese being corrected by a white Dutchman."* The janitor explained that by *'like all the others'*, he meant *'like all the other students'*, but the student interpreted it within the context of Dutch society where it is often said that *'those foreigners have to adapt'* (= a social representation, see further below). The student explained that what also made him so angry was a flashback, a memory of Dutch slavery in Surinam when it was still a colony of The Netherlands.

- The shifting of identities can be helpful when communication gets stuck. An international mediator explained that a conflict between an engineer from Singapore and his Norwegian director ended well because of a turning point in the mediation: a shared understanding of each other as fathers when they recognized the responsibility both felt for their families. There is also a strategic, instrumental use of cultural identities to get things done or to justify behaviour. The strategic use of a cultural identity is illustrated in a negotiation in which the president of a Taiwanese company tried several times to refer to the importance of not losing 'face' for Asians, merely as a means to get an extra discount. He asked for an additional discount because he was the president of the company, and he would suffer loss of face if he did not get a discount in the negotiations (Jansseune quoted in Boden, 2006, pp. 185-186). Another instrumental misuse of the national and religious cultural identity of the other to legitimise behaviour is the refusal of a German (female) judge to grant a woman a fast-track divorce. According to the judge's statement the claimant, a German woman of Moroccan descent and her husband came from a *"Moroccan cultural environment in which it is not uncommon for a man to exert a right of corporal punishment over his wife. That's what the claimant had to reckon with when she married the defendant."* The 26-year-old mother of two had been repeatedly beaten and threatened with death by her husband. The judge was removed from the case after a nationwide outcry (Conolly, 2007).
- Being true to who you are, unconcerned, authentic and having trust in yourself, self-confidence, and self-respect. Practicing inclusive competence also requires maintaining emotional stability and displaying an attitude of dedication, respect, and sincerity. 'Mistakes' can and will happen.
- Being prepared and open to differences. A competent professional is curious, flexible, has empathy and keeps in mind that differences can have various causes: personal, social,

physical, mental, legal, organisational, socio-economic, political. The TOPOI-model - see below - sensitizes to many possible differences that can be encountered during communication.

- Very important as well is the assumption of good will. It is crucial to assume that *‘Behind each behaviour displayed during communication there is positive intention’*. If you encounter behaviour or beliefs while communicating that are strange or difficult, try to assume that people always have good reasons for why they do what they do, say, or think. People who give direct feedback may try to be honest and clear about what they think. People who are indirect in their feedback may try to maintain a good relationship. This ‘assumption of others’ good will’ helps you not to jump to negative conclusions immediately, not to feel offended, and not to blame the other person or yourself. Try to find out the other’s positive intentions and acknowledge them, while remembering that acknowledgement is *not* the same as agreeing to the person’s behaviour. Acknowledgement helps to keep communication open.
- Knowing that communication is a circular process. Be aware that everyone involved in an interaction always has a share in how the communication proceeds. Interlocutors influence each other simultaneously. The listener also influences the speaker non-verbally. *‘One cannot not communicate’*, says Paul Watzlawick (2011). Hence, make sure to always consider your own share in the creation of misunderstandings and conflicts as well: What am I doing or saying that makes the other person react in that way? Besides this interpersonal, mutual influence, there is the possible influence of social representations (Moscovici, 2000). Social representations are implicit or hidden bias (Morehouse & Banaji 2024): the collectively created and shared images, prejudices, stereotypes, ‘single stories’ (Adichie 2009), perceptions, and norms that prevail in the social contexts of the interlocutors. Social representations are also the historical and current experiences of a social group - like racism, slavery, colonialism, power relations, poverty, politics - that may, usually unconsciously, influence what people say to each other and what they understand of each other. People are often not free – not in complete control - in what they say to each other and what they understand of each other. (See the example above of the janitor and the student).
- A final key element to practicing inclusive competence is to discuss things when necessary: be brave! When differences in communication are strange, difficult, or hurtful, instead of - as often happens – allowing these problems to confirm your stereotypes and prejudices, bring them up!

## The TOPOI-Model

A practical tool for dealing with experiences of strangeness in communication is the TOPOI model already developed in 1994 (originally in Dutch) by Edwin Hoffman (Hoffman & Arts 1994, Hoffman 2018, Hoffman & Verdooren 2018) based on the systemic axioms of Paul Watzlawick et al. (2011). The acronym TOPOI (Greek: plural of place) represents the five places or areas in communication where differences of various kinds may occur: Tongue refers to each person's verbal and non-verbal language; Order, to everyone’s view and logic; Persons, to the identities and roles of the persons involved and the relationship between them; Organisation, to the situational, organisational, and societal context of the interaction; and Intentions, to the motives, needs, emotions, values, and spirituality of those involved.

The TOPOI model has a twofold purpose: 1. To raise sensitivity to the many possible differences - of whatever nature - that can occur in communication in each TOPOI area, and 2. In cases where strangeness is experienced, to zoom in on the interaction using the TOPOI lens to reflect on the potential differences and misunderstandings that could play a role, and what communicative interventions can be deployed to improve matters. The TOPOI areas contain concrete, manageable communicative translations of the many factors that can play a role in communication. The TOPOI areas also include dimensions of Meyer, Hofstede and Trompenaars, among others, with the difference that they are not labelled culturally or by country but as communicative elements to which people can assign different meanings and which they can express in different ways. Among these elements are connotations, communication styles, politeness, feedback, interaction rules, body language, dealing with time, social norms, holistic/analytic/ deductive/inductive logic, building trust, relation building, status attribution, arrangement of the room, context of the organisation, societal context, decision-making, values, needs, motivation, and spirituality. Hoffman and Verdooren give numerous concrete examples of these elements in their book *Diversity competence* (2018). The TOPOI areas offer a much wider range of possible differences than the limited cultural dimensions/scales and may be used effectively in exercises to make people aware of their own communication preferences and the possible differences in these with others.

### The TOPOI-Lens

The TOPOI-lens helps to zoom in on the concrete interpersonal interaction, reflect on the possible differences and misunderstandings, formulate hypotheses, and address them with general communication interventions.

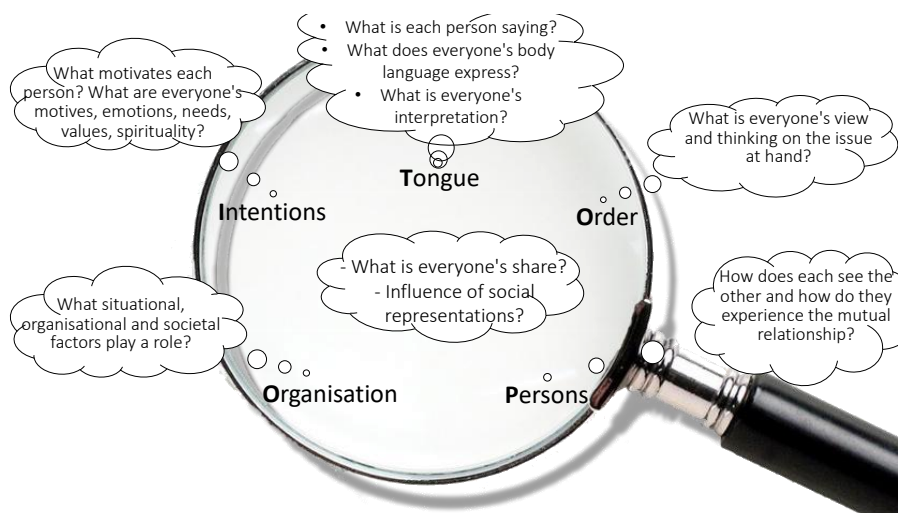


Figure 1: The TOPOI-lens. Source: Hoffman

Applying the TOPOI-lens to Meyer's case study mentioned at the beginning of this article, the succinctly inclusive communication advice for the team leader would be to emphasize that all team members are first and foremost team members and not nationalities (TOPOI area Persons). In a team meeting, team members can share one by one (Organisation) their views and ways of working regarding time management, decision-making, and other



relevant aspects of working in a team (Tongue, Organisation, and Order) *and*, very importantly, the positive reasons behind them: why they do what they do and think what they think (Intentions). These reasons can be acknowledged by all. This exchange should be done by the team members on a personal level, they should speak as team members (recognised equality), each for themselves (recognised diversity) and not in terms of 'We Chinese' or 'We Japanese' or 'This is how we do it in China or in Japan' (Persons). After this personal exchange as team members, they can agree on how they will work with each other in the team (Order). Furthermore, team building is essential (Organisation) to get to know each other better personally and thus build mutual trust and psychological safety: this is how *people* meet, not cultures.

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