



**HAL**  
open science

## Teaching and learning about interculturality in communication and management

Alexander Frame

► **To cite this version:**

Alexander Frame. Teaching and learning about interculturality in communication and management. Teaching Interculturality Otherwise, Routledge, pp.15-33, 2022, 978-1-00-334527-5. hal-03973935

**HAL Id: hal-03973935**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03973935>**

Submitted on 5 Feb 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **Teaching and learning about interculturality in communication and management**

Alexander Frame

## **Abstract**

This chapter is based on the author's experience of designing, setting up and running a 2-year English-taught MA programme in intercultural management for international students at the University of Burgundy, France. The programme seeks to train the next generation of intercultural specialists, with a critical, interpretivist and non-essentialising view of the way that individuals use cultures and identities to communicate in organisational settings. Going beyond traditional national-level or competence-based approaches to intercultural management, it promotes theoretical and practice-based understanding of the communication processes at work within organisations, joint ventures or international project teams, rooted in power relations, identity and group dynamics, and sensemaking. The chapter outlines three key phases in learning about interculturality, which the author considers necessary to foster a complex, multi-perspective understanding of the phenomenon. It describes how these three phases and the associated paradigms of interculturality shape the design of the MA programme in intercultural management, in terms of teaching contents and methods.

## **Biodata**

Dr Alex Frame is associate professor in Communication Science at the Languages and Communication Faculty of the University of Burgundy (Dijon, France), where he runs the MA course in Intercultural Management. He is a member of the TIL research group (EA 4182), specialising in intercultural, interpersonal, organisational and digital communication.

## **Introduction**

Although courses about interculturality all around the world ostensibly deal with similar questions, there may be considerable differences and divergencies between disciplinary perspectives, course objectives, epistemological postures, and so on. These may be related to individual differences in the way that scholars understand and position themselves relating to the concepts of culture and interculturality, in an interdisciplinary field which is multifaceted and in constant evolution, but also to the institutional factors that lead to a course on interculturality being offered by a given organisation or higher education institution (HEI). From my experience, the reasoning behind a module in intercultural communication being offered in a HEI in France is often either linked to a desire to take into account the cultural dimension in a related field of study, or to fulfil more-or-less vague objectives of developing 'global competences' among students. What is taught and how it is taught can vary greatly depending on institutional requirements and expectations. In the French university system, which is traditionally built around compulsory modules with few electives, interculturality is more often linked to other questions, and relatively rarely present as an option chosen only by interested and motivated students. For instance, within different programmes at my university, I currently teach interculturality linked to the localisation of websites and multimedia products, interculturality in the context of organising and managing international projects in the Arts,

interculturality from the point of view of international public relations, including the ethics of stereotyping and how to deal with diverse audiences, and intercultural negotiation skills in the light of international commerce in the food and beverages sector.

Despite the variety of courses for non-specialists, this chapter focuses in particular on a specialised programme of study for interculturalists which I set up and currently coordinate at the University of Burgundy, France. This 2-year English-taught MA programme in intercultural management deals with interculturality from the perspective of communication sciences, and applied to questions of management (diversity and inclusion, international projects/teams, change management) within organisations. As a programme for specialists, it covers multiple perspectives on interculturality, and aims to encourage learners to develop a complex view of this phenomenon. The chapter reviews the way in which the programme design can be seen to progressively develop this complex, multi-perspective view of interculturality. It is divided into three sections, structured around the questions asked by Dervin as main editor and ‘architect’ of this book, concerning the way the different chapter authors conceptualise and teach about interculturality. The initial section discusses the concept of interculturality from a communication studies perspective, as a key to understanding interpersonal communication as an intersubjective process linked to sensemaking and identities. This is important insofar as it is the vision which underpins the way interculturality is taught in the MA programme. The second section addresses the question of how we might “interculturalize interculturality” as suggested by Dervin & Jacobsson (2022), and what that might mean in such a context. The third section focuses on how this translates into course design in the MA programme, covering contents and methods used to teach and learn about interculturality, as well as potential areas for development.

Since the chapter constitutes a personal reflection on how my vision of interculturality shapes my teaching practices and this particular course design, I have chosen to use the first person to underline my proximity with the subject. The exercise naturally imposes its own limits since this self-reflective stance is likely to encourage subjective bias and some degree of self-justification. My understanding of what goes on in the programme is necessarily only partial, given that I teach some but not all of the classes described, and my colleagues do not necessarily all share the multi-perspective view of interculturality that I outline here. I am thus describing an ideal-theoretical situation which may correspond more or less closely to what actually takes place in the classroom. I have been coordinating the MA course for the past 5 years with a colleague, David Bousquet, who is a cultural studies scholar. The programme design described here reflects the current syllabus, shaped by joint decisions, and my particular rationalisation of its contents is necessarily idiosyncratic and partial. The text which follows should be read in the light of these limits, as a personal attempt to reflect on my current vision and practice of teaching interculturality in the classroom.

### **Interculturality from a communication studies perspective**

My conceptualisation of culture and interculturality has evolved over the 25 years I have been in the field. In France, in the 1990s, difference-based approaches were dominant, based on comparative models imported from English-speaking management scholars such as Hofstede or Trompenaars. They existed alongside a ‘French’ school of cross-cultural psychology, linked to the French and German Youth Office (OFAJ), with a focus on bias and phenomena based on

intergroup dynamics (Demorgon, 1989; Ladmiral & Lipiansky, 1989; Lipiansky, 1992)<sup>1</sup>. My own perspective was influenced by my attachment to the field of communication studies, meaning that I first approached intercultural communication as one particular form of interpersonal communication (Dacheux, 1999), before moving on to think more generally about how we use cultures and identities in our everyday encounters. From this perspective, interculturality gives us useful insights into interpersonal communication as a process, linked to how individuals go about making sense of and with one another, in a given context.

In the early days of intercultural communication scholarship, emphasis was placed almost exclusively on national cultural differences, associated with differences in communication style and their supposed negative impact on interpersonal communication between people of different nationalities (Romani et al., 2018). However, more recent approaches, sometimes described as ‘culture-interactional’ (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), rather than placing the emphasis less on comparing national cultures (the ‘positivist paradigm’), adopt an ‘interpretivist’ perspective. They are centred on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and look at how cultural norms, linked to the different identities foregrounded by individuals in their interactions, are negotiated, ‘performed’ or ‘emerge’ in given settings (Frame, 2014). Another epistemological tradition, linked to cultural studies and social theory, also questions the essentialising nature of cultures, looking at the way national and other cultures and identities are constructed through discourse and used to maintain or challenge relationships of power and status between social groups. The emphasis of these ‘postmodern’ and/or ‘critical’ perspectives is not so much how these cultures emerge through interactions, but how they are used to maintain social imbalance, often from a postcolonial point of view. Postmodernists tend to focus on how national cultural identities are constructed through discourse and grand narratives (Romani et al., 2018), sometimes contrasting this with the ambiguity surrounding individuals in their interactions in today’s hyperconnected world (Martin, 2004), where they are exposed to a variety of cultures and identities, many of which are rooted in digital media (Matthews, 2000). Critical scholars see their role as challenging power imbalance wherever it may occur, by deconstructing cultural discourse and identities (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Romani & Frame, 2020). The vision I have today is one that I believe I share with other academics who can be situated in the interpretivist, postmodern and/or critical schools of thought, linked to practice theory. These views are increasingly common, but still do not represent the majority of scholars who use the concept.

From this perspective, cultures are seen not as distinct sets of rules or norms which strictly regiment the behaviour of everyone in a particular national group, but rather as “repertoires of action” or “tool-kits” (Swidler, 1986) based on anticipated behavioural patterns and routines associated with particular social groups, which constitute (partly) shared and meaningful expectations of how others might behave and expect us to behave. We all have multiple identities and, along with these identities, multiple repertoires and sets of expectations which we can use in our interactions. These identities are not only national, but may be professional, regional, generational, ethnic, family, religious, organisational, or related to many other types of social groupings (Frame & Boutaud, 2010). They may be transnational and mediatised (Hepp, 2015), focused on artefacts or areas of interest, such as pop cultures linked to music, television series, video games, or sports. In this way as a communications scholar, I see all situations of interpersonal communication as intercultural, because we all use cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this research from the 1980s already touched on many of the questions which have recently been foregrounded through neuroscience approaches to interculturality, although the latter do not currently refer to the earlier French-language scholarship.

references from multiple sources in our interactions, including when there is no apparent international dimension.

This is a slightly different approach to that found in mainstream media, social and even much academic discourse, in which something flagged as ‘intercultural’ is usually identified as encompassing difference, typically national difference, and as being a source of misunderstandings, tensions and potential conflict. While it is important to take this popular representation of interculturality into account in our understanding of the way people relate to one another, my own perspective is a more positive one (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016), building on the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980) and more specifically on Identity Theory (Burke et al., 2003; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Our different identities and cultural repertoires provide us with tools for understanding one another and behaving in an understandable way, as we negotiate and perform our shared references in our interactions. They constitute the building blocks of meaning that we use to make sense of and for specific individuals, in a given situation, taking into account their identities and the interactional context (Frame, 2012). This does not have to be consensual or cooperative: I can also use my cultural knowledge to insult someone, resist or oppose them, but it is always done by taking the other into account.

When intercultural ‘problems’, ‘conflicts’ or ‘crises’ are pointed to, I often find it useful to shift the focus from cultures to identities. Where cultures are the sources of potentially-shared representations which facilitate communication, identities can be used to divide people into groups, ‘us and them’, often to try and maintain an advantage for one’s own group. This can be in terms of self-esteem (“we’re better than they are”) or in order to stigmatise the others and try to maintain them in a position of (social, symbolic, economic, political...) inferiority: they are not equal to us, and so do not deserve equal treatment, access to resources, etc. Culture often has very little to do with this, except being used as a pretext to try and justify the stigmatisation, with the underlying idea that people are prisoners of their ‘culture’, that they cannot evolve, that they are somehow different in the essence of who they are. As a scholar, I try to combat these ‘solid’, ‘essentialising’ conceptions of culture. While I realise and recognise that they reflect how we often tend to think about our fellow humans, by putting them into groups and considering these groups through certain typical, even stereotypical, traits, I believe that it is dangerous for humankind, when scholars, the media, politicians or whoever, encourage the idea that we are fundamentally different from one another.

I believe that this is a particularly topical and important question, since social media have considerably reinforced the fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere over the last 20 years. We now tend to be exposed, through the work of algorithms, to people who express similar opinions to us. Social media rarely show us views opposing our own, since this would arguably reduce engagement and user satisfaction. This leads to fragmentation and our unopposed opinions becoming more radical, by being shared only with like-minded people in the digital public sphere. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people in societies were generally exposed to a much smaller range of more mainstream media influences, through a limited number of terrestrial television channels, newspapers, or radio stations. Now it is easy with social media to find groups of people sharing and encouraging extreme views, whether political, religious, racial, or whatever (Kaluža, 2021). This media landscape, or digital media logic (Altheide, 2013), appears to be creating new types of ‘cultural bubbles’ within societies, by promoting

opposing world views, isolating connected online groups algorithmically in a way not dissimilar to the geographical isolation responsible for cultural differentiation in a previous era.<sup>2</sup>

In the last few years, I have found myself in situations where I have been faced with someone with whom I feel I am not able to find intellectual common ground, because our world views are markedly different on a particular question. This is not ‘interculturality’ in the international sense or the ‘ethnic’ one. These are people with whom I share many vectors of socialisation: we live nearby, have a similar income, are of a similar age, speak the same language, etc., but have such different political views, for example, that it appears impossible to find any shared intellectual starting point from which we can begin building a consensus on the topic. I would argue that this phenomenon runs more deeply than heartfelt differences of opinion, which have always existed, as have newspapers with their politically-oriented readerships. ‘Algorithmic isolation’ leads to contrasting ‘factual representations of the world which underpin these differences of opinion, and in the ‘post-truth’ era (Keyes, 2004; Lewandowsky et al., 2017), ‘fact’ becomes the object not so much of debate as of belief. Affinity and affect have replaced the Habermassian ideal of *deliberation*, fuelled by polarised social media posts and conspiracy theories (Brachotte et al., forthcoming), where everyone and no one is recognised as an ‘expert’. In reference to the earlier discussion of cultures, the building blocks upon which we might construct a common vision do not, in such cases, seem to fit together. I believe that this is a new form of interculturality, where the word takes on its full meaning. If we are to address this as scholars, we need to stop thinking about cultures solely as unified national blocks, or monoliths.

While such ‘new’ forms of interculturality are often not recognised as such, there is also a risk that academic discourse promoting a more fluid vision of cultures and interculturality also misses its target when it comes to analysing the influence of national and other cultures which are more often identified and labelled as such in everyday interactions. After spending several years trying to widen students’ perspectives beyond the national level of culture, I have also come to realise that this perspective is not sufficient in itself, since it risks ignoring the social context in which discourse about interculturality is being produced. It is true that macro-level generalisations cannot be applied directly on the microsocial level because they ignore the way people actually communicate and adapt to one another, based on the identities, groups or categories which they ascribe to one another. However, this same social categorisation, which is fundamental to the way people relate to each other, is often based on cultural differences as a social construct. People see each other as belonging to different national, religious, ethnic, generational groups, etc., generally linked to more-or-less stereotyped representations of those groups, based on more-or-less fantasized or realistic behavioural patterns which are seen to constitute social norms in those groups. As such, the representations that “Germans behave like this” or “Young people behave like that”, however factually and contextually inaccurate they may turn out to be, are part of our expectations of individuals we assign to social groups different to our own, and may shape our behaviour towards them and the way we interpret what they say and do. Critical approaches to cross-cultural communication and management have also underlined the way in which these differences may be constructed strategically, in order to seek to perpetuate or to challenge power differentials between ingroups and outgroups (Dervin & Machart, 2015a; Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Primecz et al., 2016). Another challenge today is thus to take into account this discourse around national and other cultures, the

---

<sup>2</sup> In reality, several forms of cultural differentiation are involved in this process: exposure to a limited set of representations, but also pressures linked to ingroup and outgroup differentiation.

consciousness of ‘interculturality’ which changes the frame of analysis (Frame, 2015) and to understand how this *also* affects the way people relate to one another.

When it comes to teaching and learning about interculturality, this vision has led me to distinguish 3 phases through which learners can usefully be accompanied, in order to gradually build up a complex understanding of the phenomenon. These can also be indexed on the four research paradigms in cross-cultural management identified by Laurence Romani and her colleagues (Romani et al., 2018). The three phases, which will be further developed and applied to intercultural management in a later section, are summarized in table 1:

Phase	Paradigm	Type of understanding
1: Decentring	Positivist	Overcoming ethnocentrism and learning about potential macro-level cultural differences between social groups as a shared source of predictability in interpersonal communication.
2: Fluidifying	Interpretivist	Learning about the negotiation of cultures and identities in contextualised, micro-level interactions: the emergent dimension of cultures as intersubjective processes.
3: Re-categorising	Postmodern, Critical	Taking into account representations of other social groups as discursive constructs impacting behaviour and understanding, related to intergroup dynamics and power differentials.

**Table 1: Three phases of learning about interculturality**

### **Interculturalizing interculturality**

Although these three phases of learning about interculturality aim to gradually complexify the learners’ understanding of the phenomenon, we could argue that they do not go very far in ‘interculturalizing interculturality’, as Dervin and Jacobsson (2022) and the editors of this collective volume invite us to do. On one level of understanding, this expression invites scholars to try to overcome a traditional ‘Western-centric’ focus in the field of intercultural communication education. It is highly paradoxical that this should be necessary in a field which is supposed to reflect on how to better take into account diversity. As an English-speaking scholar who has grown up and lived all my life in Western Europe, I understand and appreciate the need to avoid adopting a solely ‘Western’ approach to interculturality, in order to try to engage with other perspectives and other voices. It is something that I strive to promote when designing courses about interculturality. From a scientific standpoint, however, this is no simple feat, since it would entail a major upheaval of the current sociological structures of scholarship: peer-reviewed journals, criteria for funding allocation, publication-based criteria for recruitment, promotion, etc. The sociology of international academia not only uses English as a *lingua franca* but tends to reinforce the expression of Western views and ideas through its implicit or explicit editorial norms and the peer-review process. Non-Western scholars often have their work reviewed by ‘peers’ from the West who collaborate with scientific journals, and as a result find themselves having to compose with Western terms, concepts and references in order to ‘improve’ their work to reach the ‘international standard’ required to have it published in these journals which are taken as references for the international scientific community. They may themselves feel obliged to ‘prove their credentials’ by respecting these

unquestioned norms in their writing, twisting and adapting it to fit into the Western epistemological mould.<sup>3</sup>

The project to make audible other voices and perspectives in the field of interculturality is thus a very necessary one. But to succeed it would require far more than an affirmative-action-style approach foregrounding scholars of non-Western national origins. Indeed, it is important to avoid the other extreme, which would result in essentialising views of interculturality based on the national or ethnic origin of the person speaking. This is reminiscent of situations in which anti-essentialist, fluid approaches to interculturality meet the preservationist heterocentrism<sup>4</sup> of cultural studies. On the one hand, an anti-essentialist, *laissez-faire* attitude can lead to the most powerful groups imposing hegemonic cultural norms to the point of excluding diverse voices. This is arguably the case currently in the field of intercultural communication. On the other hand, a posture of anti-anti-essentialism (Gilroy, 1993) can result in pressures to (artificially) preserve a supposed cultural ‘purity’ – itself a very utopian, essentialising idea – with the risk of inventing or promoting voices for the sake of their supposed (constructed) difference. I believe that we can collectively make progress on this if we have a dose of sensitivity to issues of power and privilege, and if we can raise awareness of the underlying Western-centric normativity of the field, by publicly discussing questions such as those raised by Dervin and Yuan (e.g. Dervin & Yuan, 2021).

I also believe that ‘Interculturalizing interculturality should not just be about national cultures or transnational cultures associated with regions of the globe such as the West, the East, the Global South, and so on. We should also think about all of the other cultures which affect the way we communicate. As a communication studies scholar, my main focus remains on the way people actively use cultures and identities to try and make sense of one another and for one another. These cultures and identities are numerous and cover both what Adrian Holliday calls ‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 2000; Holliday et al., 2016) and larger ones. When thinking about organisations, for example, it is important to put into the equation the influence of organisational cultures, professional cultures, local departmental cultures, communities of practice, and so on. When we communicate, depending on the situation and how well we know one another, we may also draw on our family cultures, our religious cultures, cultures linked to our leisure activities and interests, to our friendship groups and political ideas. As outlined previously, we may encounter very different world views even with people with whom we share very similar sociological profiles, due to ‘algorithmic isolation’. ‘Interculturalizing interculturality’ can thus also be about challenging dominant representations by multiplying the disciplinary and epistemological perspectives on interculturality, bringing all of these elements into the frame, in order to better understand the way that interculturality functions as a phenomenon, shaping and shaped by our communication.

### **Teaching about interculturality applied to communication and management**

---

<sup>3</sup> Even when identified as a French scholar, I have received negative reviews for a proposed text in English, claiming that my work on political communication in France uses predominantly French references whose “quality cannot be verified” (presumably meaning that the reviewer does not have this competence). The reviewer also stated that “a simple Google Scholar search of the keywords shows multiple references in English which are not acknowledged in the text”, and proceeded to list a few examples of these important English-language references, including one of my own books!

<sup>4</sup> Jonas Stier reminds us of the dangers of exoticising “heterocentrism” (the obsession with difference) and “xenocentrism” (the obsession with the Other) in the field of intercultural communication (Stier, 2010).

This section discusses how I seek to apply the three phases of teaching and learning about interculturality, introduced in table 1 to the MA course in intercultural management at the University of Burgundy<sup>5</sup>. The course is taught face to face over two years to a group of around 15 graduate students recruited internationally and coming from all parts of the world. As an English-taught ‘international master’s’ degree, students pay a specific annual course fee of 4000€. Typically, students joining the course have a degree in the liberal arts, which they have either completed recently or prior to 5 to 10 years of professional experience. Some have previous knowledge of the classic theories of interculturality, and several years of working internationally, while others are moving into a more-or-less unfamiliar field. Their stated aims when choosing this course are typically to increase their soft skills linked to interculturality and to obtain a diploma allowing them to begin working or move on in their career in the fields of international project management, diversity and inclusion, intercultural training or coaching, global mobility, international HR or international marketing, among others.

The programme is composed of four semesters of study. The first two semesters, lasting 13 weeks each, take place in Dijon. It is over the course of this first year of study that the concept of interculturality is discussed from different perspectives, encouraging the students to build up a complex view of the phenomenon. The second year is dedicated to a specialisation through study abroad in a partner university in semester 3, a short semester 4 in Dijon and a 4-to-5-month internship. The exchange semester typically allows the students to concentrate on and specialise in a particular area of the course, such as critical interculturality, culture and area studies, business and management, geopolitics or migration studies, as well as improving their language skills in the language of the host country. The 7-week long fourth semester is dedicated to finalising the 2-year MA thesis, French language certification, some optional specialisation subjects and guest lectures. It ends with the long internship which gives the students a chance to apply what they have learnt in an organisational setting, build their CV through practical experience and frequently to move directly into employment in the same organisation at the end of the course.

The MA programme is coordinated by two full-time academics (myself and David Bousquet) and taught jointly by a team of around 40, composed of academics (≈40%: approximately half from the University of Burgundy and half from other universities), teachers (≈30%, typically for language classes) and professionals working in the field (≈30%). The ICM programme is structured around three pillars: *interculturality*, *language teaching* and *management*. Although the cultural dimension underlies all of these, I will concentrate in this chapter on the way that we teach interculturality in particular. However, regarding the other parts of the course, one of the difficulties we have encountered as course coordinators is to manage the different perspectives on interculturality among the teaching staff, and namely the uncritical positivist approaches of many non-specialist teachers and academics who teach classes on languages or various aspects of management, approaches which are shared by some established intercultural trainers. We discuss perspectives on interculturality when recruiting new staff members, and explain the critical and complex approach which the course as a whole presents to the students, in the hope that teachers adapt to or adopt this. However, where they are not familiar with such perspectives, and if they see their subject as only indirectly related to interculturality, they do not necessarily embrace this complexity. In such cases, depending at what point in the 2 years their class takes place, the students can be quite vocal in underlining what they have come to

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://blog.u-bourgogne.fr/mastericm/about-us/>. Page accessed on 29/07/2022.

see as the limits of sweeping national-level generalisations, and quite critical towards the classes in question.

The classes specifically dealing with interculturality can be more-or-less closely associated with the three phases of learning about interculturality identified above (table 1) and with the four paradigms listed by Romani and colleagues (Romani et al., 2018). They are presented in this way in table 2.

Phase	Paradigm(s)	Class	Hours	Semester
1: Decentring	Positivist	Introduction to Intercultural Communication	12	1
1: Decentring	Positivist	Culture Shock and Mobility	10 + 8	1 + 2
1: Decentring	Positivist	Culture and Area studies	6 + 6	1 + 2
1: Decentring	Positivist, Postmodern	Cultural Differences Seminar	12 + 12	2 + 4
2: Fluidifying	Interpretivist, Critical	Managing Diversity	10	1
2: Fluidifying	Interpretivist, Postmodern, Critical	Anthropology & Ethnography	6	2
2: Fluidifying	Interpretivist, Postmodern, Critical	Cultures in Organisations	6	2
2: Fluidifying	Interpretivist	Interpersonal Communication	8	2
3: Re-categorising	Postmodern, Critical	Intercultural Communication Theory	12	2
3: Re-categorising	Interpretivist, Postmodern, Critical	Intercultural Management	12	2
3: Re-categorising	Interpretivist, Postmodern, Critical	Thesis seminar	12 + 12	2 + 4

**Table 2: The three phases of learning about interculturality in the ICM MA course**

### *Decentring the intercultural gaze*

The course begins with what I have described as the ‘decentring phase’. This involves difference-based approaches aiming to overcome ethnocentrism and deals with material covered in the majority of intercultural communication training courses, focusing on macro-level, collective representations, and the differences between national groups. The ‘Introduction to Intercultural Communication’ class covers definitions of the key concepts and the main theories and models in the field, both comparative and more communication-based (including Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory, as well as the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, Acculturation theory, culture shock, etc.). This is done to ensure that students are aware of these key references, and to begin a more critical discussion of them, situating the models in their epistemological tradition and underlining their limits and biases. One two-hour session is dedicated to the Hofstede model, covering the dimensional model itself, and criticism of it. In general, the classes use the ‘flipped

learning' model: students are given reading to do before class, and then this is discussed during class, linked to slides and group exercises. The class also involves debates on underlying questions, which the students prepare and perform in teams: universalism vs particularism applied to culture, and the social vs biological definitions of the concept of race.

Alongside this introductory module, taught over the first 6 weeks of semester 1, the 'Culture Shock and Mobility' class gives the students a chance to act as trainers for other students interested in interculturality. They are invited to plan and facilitate 5 online workshops designed to encourage non-specialist students to think about interculturality, in order to help the latter prepare for study mobility in a partner university. The classes are devoted to helping the ICM students plan their workshops, and then to debriefing and troubleshooting. They are thus required to think from a trainer's perspective about how other students approach cultures, and how they can moderate sessions on interculturality. The classes in the second semester go further in thinking about how to develop non-essentialist approaches to cultures through training, as well as having the ICM students film and work on their moderation techniques.

The 'Culture and Area studies' classes were a later addition to the ICM programme, corresponding to a repeated request from the students to learn more about specific 'cultural zones'. Originally, as programme coordinators, we did not wish to include anything so potentially essentialising, especially given the limited amount of class time which could reasonably be devoted to this. The teachers are academic or professional 'specialists' of different geographical zones (Africa, Australasia, China, India, the Middle East...) who are encouraged to present in a non-essentialising way, moving between national-level and other types of important social groupings (religious, ethnic, professional...) which can form the basis of meaningful identifications for individuals in the regions concerned. This 'area studies' approach in the first two semesters is completed with the 'Cultural Differences Seminar' in semesters 2 and 4. The second-year students are invited to present various national cultures to the first years, based on their experiences abroad during the exchange semester, but also their personal experiences of growing up and living in different countries. They are encouraged to present macro-level differences while remaining sensitive to the generalising nature of the exercise, resulting from individual rationalisation and sense-making, and to underline the limits of such generalisations, apparent contradictions, confusions, and situations in which behaviour observed could not be explained by such projected regularities. Given that the students base their accounts on their own experiences and refer to the multiple identities which may become salient, as well as focusing on the inherent ambiguity they may encounter, I consider that this class alternates between the positivist and the postmodern paradigms, thus opening onto more complex conceptualisations of cultures and identities.

The marked shift away from more simplistic positivist approaches since the 1990s, because of their potentially essentialising nature, raises the question of whether we should (still) be teaching and learning about them today. However, given the continued importance of the positivist approach to interculturality in social and media discourse in general, I could not imagine not including it in the course: I believe that students need to be aware of the models and theories, as well as their limits, and they need to learn how to deal with people who do define interculturality through the prism of imagined national cultural differences. Others might feel that the vicious circle needs to be broken completely, though personally I would find it hard to imagine specialists of interculturality who were not somewhat familiar with these approaches. However, I feel strongly that interculturality should not be about *strengthening* perceptions of difference, any more than it should be about *denying these perceptions*, which are very common and which affect our behaviour towards one another. What is needed is a

greater degree of complexity: understanding that the supposed macro-level distinctions are a necessary part of interpersonal communication, alongside other identities, and taking them into account as such.

### *Fluidifying approaches to cultures and identities*

The second phase in learning about interculturality thus aims to shift the perspective from macro-level similarities and differences to the micro-level processes which govern the way we use different cultures in our communication to make sense of ourselves and others. In the ICM course, we do this through various classes which introduce the interpretivist, but also the critical and postmodern paradigms. Since Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) is about managing different identities and cultures within an organisation, the class on “Managing Diversity”, taught in the first semester, already addresses intergroup dynamics, power and privilege and raises the question of how we take into account our multiple, intersectional identities and cultures in our behaviour towards one another<sup>6</sup>. It is thus a first approach in the programme to these questions, paving the way for more intensive discussions of the underlying processes in the second semester.

The second semester classes begin with an introduction to ‘Anthropology and Ethnography’, which is then developed through a semester-long research seminar and project in which the students carry out participant observation and ethnographic analysis. Unlike the seminar, the introductory classes figure in table 2 because the associated reading and discussions centre on deconstructing the concept of culture. Starting from discussions in the field of anthropology, the students are introduced to critical literature on culture, which questions both its use and its usefulness as a concept. They are invited to debate this collectively and to position themselves both for and against the continued use of the term, in the light of discussions of liquid and solid approaches to cultures. This in turn underlines the need to conceptualise communication in terms of multiple identities, multiple levels of common expectations (cultures), and the interpersonal contexts in which we communicate. It introduces discussions of small cultures and cultures as building blocks, repertoires or tool-boxes.

These subjects are then picked up first in the class on ‘Cultures in Organisations’, and then in ‘Interpersonal Communication’. The former deals with the multiple identities and cultures which are found in any organisational context, their interplay through interactions and the ‘negotiated cultures’ (Brannen & Salk, 2000) which result from sensemaking processes in everyday working situations (Weick, 1995). It explicitly introduces the postmodern paradigm with reference to work by Joanne Martin (1992, 2004), as well as critical approaches to national identifications in the context of joint ventures or international projects, from cross-cultural management literature (Van den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2015; Ybema & Byun, 2009). The ‘Interpersonal Communication’ class uses a symbolic interactionist perspective to explain the way that we employ different identities and cultural references in our everyday interactions, and introduces the ‘semiopragmatics model of communication’ (Frame, 2012) as a way of thinking about interculturality by articulating macro-level and micro-level perspectives.

---

<sup>6</sup> The topic is clearly increasing in importance in organisations in general, spreading from North America to other parts of the world. I believe that this reflects the growing importance of identities and identification in society in general, which has been underlined by sociologists for many years (Bauman, 2011; Featherstone, 1995; Weber, 1905). But it is also a less essentialist way of framing interculturality, which recognises the discursive, identity-based nature of perceived difference, and relates this to questions of management. As such, I see it as a key area of development for interculturalists.

### *Re-categorising perceptions in the light of intergroup dynamics*

The third phase of learning about interculturality concerns the need to take into account social discourse and people's beliefs about interculturality itself. This involves coming to terms with what Fred Dervin calls the 'simplicity' (see Dervin, 2016; Dervin & Gross, 2016) of the concept: even if culture is complex, people don't tend to see it that way, and use various identity labels in a 'solid', essentialising and thus simple fashion. One of the keys to understanding this and including it in analyses of interculturality is to pay attention to the way cultures are constructed in discourse: "they are doing things that way, because it is their culture", "they are not respecting our traditions and values", etc., whoever 'they' and 'we' happen to be in the circumstances. Critical scholars have shown how this process of rationalising behaviour in cultural terms, thereby using 'cultures' as a pretext, as an excuse, can lead us to manipulate identities to try to keep others out, to maintain privilege, to stigmatise, or to assert our rights (Dervin & Machart, 2015b; Holliday, 2015).

In the ICM course, many of these ideas are introduced within the discussions of the interpretivist approach: thinking about the way that cultures are negotiated and multiple identities are taken into account in interactions also tends to spur reflections on which identities are being used in a given context, and how, which in turn leads to considerations of power relations and intergroup dynamics. Many of the aforementioned classes thus also deal with these questions. However, other classes go more deeply into the specifics of power and privilege. 'Intercultural Communication Theory' deals with postcolonial and cultural studies approaches to interculturality, from a textual point of view where power is often mediated through language, but also gives students a chance to explore and discuss the links between interculturality and the algorithms which shape today's digital public sphere. 'Intercultural Management' combines critical approaches to cross-cultural management, in the form of case studies looking at how inequality and discrimination are created and perpetuated in the workplace through language and organisational structures, and discussions of working practices in virtual teams and how to avoid potential problems stemming from inequalities linked to the online medium. Finally, the thesis seminars in both the first and second years (semesters 2 and 4), plus the individual thesis tuition throughout the course, deal with both methodological and theoretical questions, aiming to help students avoid the traps of methodological determinism and apply multiple perspectives to their research questions.

In the case of a programme such as ICM, which caters for specialists, sufficient time is available to develop in-depth understanding of these different perspectives, through a variety of pedagogical activities. These include interactive discussions of readings, theories and ideas, relating them where possible to students' own experiences, or to videos, role plays or games designed to simulate the phenomena in question. What can be interesting is not just the exercises themselves, but the vision of interculturality that they implicitly portray. For example, as well as shorter exercises on stereotyping or group dynamics, I use both a version of the intercultural training game 'Barnaga' and an exercise in 'intercultural negotiation' which I ask the students to review critically once completed, taking into account different perspectives on interculturality. Moreover, repetition is important. As described above, the fact that different subjects cover complementary topics and perspectives, that students are able to make links between cases seen in different classes and with different colleagues, helps reinforce their grasp on and confidence in using the various models in new contexts. Having the students carry out ethnographic research themselves over an extended period shapes and sharpens the way they consider social phenomena. Having them keep a journal for self-reflection on the different

identities they use, and when and how they use them, helps raise awareness of otherwise implicit social phenomena.

However, as mentioned previously, such courses for specialists are relatively scarce and do not represent the majority of teaching about interculturality. MA programmes in other countries are often less ‘tubular’ than they are in France, with less compulsory modules. Classes for non-specialists often leave teachers and learners considerably less time in which to develop a complex understanding of the phenomenon. In this domain, a little knowledge can be counterproductive if it leads to reinforcing stereotypes or representations of difference. In a short time-frame, it is challenging to complete the three phases of learning about interculturality, and even if this is possible, the lack of time may limit the effectiveness of such teaching. Indeed, it is important for students to be able to think about, discuss extensively and apply the different paradigms to different examples in order to truly assimilate them and be able to themselves employ or propose multiple perspectives in a given situation (Kokkonen et al., forthcoming).

## **Conclusion**

The current period is a particularly critical one for teaching and learning about interculturality. Societal debates (or the lack thereof) about immigration, cultural appropriation, wokism, cancel culture, diversity, equity and inclusion, or the side-effects of the digital revolution on the way cultural knowledge and references circulate online, are all hot topics for interculturalists. Although the field has been encountering what some scholars have described as ‘theoretical turbulence’ (Poutiainen, 2014), this has largely not filtered beyond the closed doors of academia: in the media but also among many professional trainers, positivist approaches to interculturality remain dominant, with a quasi-exclusive focus on national cultures and cultural differences, and often little concern for how the term ‘culture’ is used as a concept.

Although this context makes it harder to think outside the box and to apply complex approaches to better understand the phenomenon commonly described as interculturality, this is exactly the challenge for the next generation of thinkers and citizens of the world. They need to be able to contextualise and question overly-simplistic implicit models, to be aware of multiple identities, of negotiated cultures, and of the way these structure our communication in particular contexts, and also of power issues and the way cultural identities can be instrumentalised through discourse. They should develop the capacity to bring new perspectives to societal debates centred on culture or identity-related phenomena, contributing to these debates with a balanced and critical view.

The three phases of learning about interculturality outlined here can help learners achieve a sufficient degree of competency in applying various perspectives to analyse phenomena described as ‘intercultural’ in an appropriate and complex way. The discussion of the MA programme in intercultural management at the University of Burgundy illustrates how we have sought to implement these three phases through the programme design<sup>7</sup>. Despite the fact that the three phases aim to develop the complexity of learners’ understanding of interculturality, it is important that teaching about the topic does not become excessively theoretical and abstract.

---

<sup>7</sup> Since different learners react differently to the teaching materials and activities proposed, and given the fact that the programme involves multiple teaching staff, who may all have slightly different conceptions of and ways of teaching about the different perspectives, the programme design may differ somewhat from its execution and from what different learners actually take away from it. Since these elements were beyond the scope of this chapter, and would naturally require further investigation, no claims are being made about the programme’s actual impact.

As far as possible, teachers should seek to combine the conceptual and the practical, bringing in practice-based teaching postures and experiential learning, as a complement to readings and abstract discussions<sup>8</sup>. However, it is important not to propose exoticizing activities with no conceptual depth, designed simply to highlight difference. This can be a particular risk in shorter courses for non-specialists, notably with an international group of participants. Activities should be designed to encourage learners to engage with the ideas being discussed, and the limits of the activities themselves can also be a topic of conversation. Ideally, discussions should allow learners to make links with ongoing societal debates or current affairs, applying different perspectives to these. Many media texts relating to questions of immigration, politics, foreign travel, etc. make cultural or identity-based distinctions, and it can be interesting to question the vision of interculturality which shapes them.

In terms of its necessary societal impact, the field of interculturality still faces several major challenges to overcome in the next few years. Through the courses we teach, we should try to dispel the widespread (mis)conception that reduces interculturality to national cultures and to difference. It should not be about glamourising folklore and traditions, reinforcing the idea that we all belong in our own boxes. 'Interculturalizing' the field itself will involve overcoming the Western-centric stance, as well as the sole focus on national differences, while avoiding the risk of conceptual relativism and essentialising exoticism. 'Algorithmic isolation' and the fragmentation of the online public sphere are remapping social structures along affinity-based lines, leading to new and unanticipated representational divides in society, which can usefully be analysed in terms of identities and cultural references. Finally, critical approaches and complexity require considerably more cognitive engagement than stereotypes and generalisations. This makes it all the more important that we find appropriate methods and learning activities to ensure that the (critical) courses we teach about interculturality have a significant impact on learners, so that they themselves then become the multipliers of these ideas and help redefine the way we talk about these important questions in society as a whole.

## References

- Altheide, D. L. (2013). Media logic, social control, and fear. *Communication Theory* 23(3), 223-238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12017>
- Barmeyer, C. & Franklin, P. (2016). *Intercultural Management. A Case-Based Approach to Achieving Complementarity and Synergy*. London: Palgrave.
- Bauman, Z. (2011). *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brachotte, G., Frame, A., Gautier, L., Nazarov, W. & Selmi, A. (forthcoming). Les discours complotistes sur Twitter à propos de la vaccination contre la COVID-19 en France: Communautés et analyse sémio-linguistique des #. *Mots*.
- Brannen, M. Y. & Salk, J. E. (2000). Partnering across borders: Negotiating organizational culture in a German-Japanese joint venture. *Human Relations* 53(4), 451-487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700534001>
- Burke, P. J., Owens, T. J., Serpe, R. T. & Thoits, P. A. (Eds.). (2003). *Advances in Identity Theory and Research*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers.
- Burke, P. J. & Stets, J. E. (2009). *Identity Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>8</sup> A recent book by Robert Gibson (2021), an intercultural trainer and consultant, offers many useful exercises and case studies applied to business and management, which are compatible with a complex view of interculturality, going beyond the positivist paradigm.

Dacheux, E. (1999). La communication: Point aveugle de l'interculturel ? *Bulletin de l'ARIC* 31, 1-2.

- Demorgon, J. (1989). *L'exploration interculturelle: Pour une pédagogie internationale*. Paris : Armand Colin.
- Dervin, F. (2016). *Interculturality in Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dervin, F. & Jacobsson, A. (2022). *Intercultural Communication Education: Broken Realities and Rebellious Dreams*. London: Springer.
- Dervin, F. & Yuan, M. (2021). *Revitalizing Interculturality: Chinese Minzu as a Companion*. London: Routledge.
- Dervin, F., & Gross, Z. (2016). Towards the simultaneity of intercultural competence. In: Dervin, F. & Gross, Z. (Eds.). *Intercultural competence in education: Alternative approaches for different times* (pp. 1-10). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dervin, F. & Machart, R. (Eds.). (2015a). *Cultural Essentialism in Intercultural Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dervin, F. & Machart, R. (2015b). Introduction: Omniscient Culture, Omnipotent Cultures. In: Dervin, F. & Machart, R. (Eds.). *Cultural Essentialism in Intercultural Relations* (pp. 1-11). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Featherstone, M. (1995). *Undoing Culture. Globalisation, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage.
- Frame, A. (2012). Cultures, identities and meanings in intercultural encounters: A semiopragmatics approach to cross-cultural team-building. In: Carayol, V. & Frame, A. (Eds.). *Communication and PR from a Cross-Cultural Standpoint. Practical and Methodological Issues* (pp. 31-42). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Frame, A. (2014). On cultures and interactions: Theorizing the complexity of intercultural encounters. In: Poutiainen, S. (Ed.). *Theoretical Turbulence in Intercultural Communication Studies* (pp. 29-44). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Frame, A. (2015). Étranges interactions: Cadrer la communication interculturelle à l'aide de Goffman? In: Lardellier, P. (Ed.). *Actualité d'Erving Goffman, de l'interaction à l'institution* (pp. 79-96). Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Frame, A. & Boutaud, J.-J. (2010). Performing Identities and Constructing Meaning in Interpersonal Encounters: A Semiopragmatics Approach to Communication. In *Mémoires de la société néophilologique de Helsinki LXXXI* (pp. 85-96). Société Néophilologique.
- Gibson, R. (2021). *Bridge the Culture Gaps: A Toolkit for Effective Collaboration in the Diverse, Global Workplace*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Boston: Harvard University Press / Verso.
- Hepp, A. (2015). *Transcultural Communication*. London: Wiley.
- Holliday, A. (2000). Culture as constraint or resource: Essentialist versus non-essentialist views. *Iatefl Language and Cultural Studies SIG Newsletter* 18, 38-40.
- Holliday, A. (2015). Afterword. In: Dervin, F. & Machart, R. (Eds.). *Cultural Essentialism in Intercultural Relations* (pp. 198-202). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holliday, A., Kullman, J. & Hyde, M. (2016). *Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book for Students*. London: Routledge.
- Kaluža, J. (2021). Habitual generation of filter bubbles: Why is algorithmic personalisation problematic for the democratic public sphere? *Javnost - The Public* 0, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.2003052>
- Keyes, R. (2004). *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. London: Macmillan.

- Kokkonen, L., Jager, R., Frame, A. & Raappana, M. (forthcoming). Overcoming essentialism? Students' reflections on learning intercultural communication online. *Education Sciences*, 12(9).
- Ladmiral, J.-R. & Lipiansky, E.-M. (1989). *La communication interculturelle*. Paris : Armand Colin.
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6(4), 353-369.
- Lipiansky, E.-M. (1992). *Identité et communication*. Paris: PUF.
- Martin, J. (1992). *Cultures in Organizations. Three Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, J. (2004). *Organizational Culture* (Research Paper Series n°1847). Stanford Graduate School of Business.
- Mathews, G. (2000). *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. London: Routledge.
- Nakayama, T. K. & Halualani, R. T. (Eds.) (2010). *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Poutiainen, S. (Ed.) (2014). *Theoretical Turbulence in Intercultural Communication Studies*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Primecz, H., Mahadevan, J. & Romani, L. (2016). Why is cross-cultural management scholarship blind to power relations? Investigating ethnicity, language, gender and religion in power-laden contexts. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 16(2), 127-136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595816666154>
- Romani, L., Barmeyer, C., Primecz, H. & Pilhofer, K. (2018). Cross-cultural management studies: State of the field in the four research paradigms. *International Studies of Management & Organization* 0, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.2018.1480918>
- Romani, L. & Frame, A. (2020). Les études critiques en gestion interculturelle. *Communication & Organisation* 58(2), 25-40. Cairn.info. <https://doi.org/10.4000/communicationorganisation.9201>
- Spencer-Oatey, H. & Franklin, P. (2009). *Intercultural Interaction: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stier, J. (2010). The blindspots and biases of intercultural communication studies: A discussion on episteme and doxa in a field. *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 24(3). <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr24/stier-24.htm>
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic Interactionism: Social Structural Version*. Amsterdam: Benjamin/Cummings Pub. Co.
- Stryker, S. & Burke, P. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63(4), 284-297.
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51(2), 273-286. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095521>
- Van den Ende L., & Van Marrewijk, A. (2015). The social construction of cultural differences in a Siberian joint-venture megaproject. *Journal of Strategic Contracting and Negotiation* 1(2), 168-185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055563615598164>
- Weber, M. (1905). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage.
- Ybema, S. & Byun, H. (2009). Cultivating cultural differences in asymmetric power relations. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* 9(3), 339-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595809346600>

