



Differentness: A New Constructivist Approach for Intercultural Education and Training

Traditional intercultural communication education has primarily focused on cultural differences between groups. This course suggests temporarily setting aside the term "cultural," which often directs people's attention to differences as pre-existing, objectively observable contrasts, and shifting attention to understanding differences as phenomena that are being constructed within interpersonal and social interactions—*differentness*, rather than difference.

Differentness is not something naturally present in reality; it becomes visible only when we delineate our environment and outline the subjects. Differentness refers to the differences that arise in relationships with others, meaningful only in specific situations and dialogues. For example, discussing time management can highlight contrasts like morning people vs. night owls, working individuals vs. retirees, or singles vs. married people. The discrepancies and gaps that arise between divided positions can be seen as differentness.

The course aims to clarify how perceptual constructivism and the concept of differentness can help us to reframe intercultural training and education efforts towards a more dynamic idea of intercultural communication relationships. Although it is not a pre-requisite, this course would benefit from having attended the IDRAcademy core course on the New Paradigm.

Intended For:

Teachers, trainers, coaches, consultants, and others who are looking for new frameworks and methods to update their work. This course should be particularly appealing to those who have been searching for relevant "non-Western" approaches to intercultural work.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand why perceptual constructivism is important. The reality that appears “truly” visible, audible, and tangible differs based on individual focus and community or group-level habitual methods. The course emphasizes the importance of realizing these different realities.
- Expand the scope of intercultural communication education beyond traditional social categories such as “culture,” Recognizing that, in addition to group-level differences, inherent or acquired neurological developments also contribute to diverse perceptions and interpretations of *differentness*.
- Enhance sensitivity to fluidity in intercultural communication education by recognizing that various positional differences related to context continuously emerge and disappear.
- Learn to explain what is perceived as “normal” and “not normal” using linguistic concepts of “unmarked” and “marked,” understanding how context determines what becomes marked and the vulnerabilities and values of the marked positions.
- Participate in the “Let's Talk About Differentness” presentation exercise. This exercise involves sharing personal experiences in contexts where participants find themselves marked. Discussing *differentness* encourages awareness of the micro-otherness” experienced by individuals living in a diverse and multi-layered social context.
- Explore how these ideas and methods can be applied in both educational and organizational training settings.

Background:

These approaches originated from efforts to teach intercultural communication to Japanese university students and are documented in a new textbook (Yamamoto et al, 2022, in Japanese). As such, they represent a kind of non-Western approach to intercultural communication.

Historically, the vast majority of people in Japan have shared East Asian physical features and spoken Japanese. Practices like ancestor worship and reverence for nature not regarded as religious acts, but rather as integral parts of the lifestyle and annual traditions. Events like Christmas and Valentine's Day, despite their origins in other cultural religions, have similarly been assimilated into these annual customs. Many students perceived issues like racial conflicts in America or religious conflicts globally as distant and unrelated. In such an environment, I felt that narratives based

predominantly on highly recognized social categories such as nationality, race, or religion were insufficient for teaching intercultural communication.

On the other hand, Japanese people are very sensitive to differences in more micro-level contexts that feel more real to them, such as in workplaces, schools, and local communities. For instance, in Japanese schools from elementary to high school, students spend most of their year with a fixed group of about 40 classmates. Within this context, students often create divisions, such as among "introverted" and "extraverted" or "sociable" characters, splitting the group into distinct categories. They fear being seen as not normal in the "marked" positions. In this way, *differentness* that is being constructed in their social contexts becomes the central way that they experience intercultural communication.

This course aims to cultivate an awareness of this immediate *differentness* as a basis for broader societal inclusivity. While the initial focus was on Japanese students, the relevance and utility of this approach can extend universally. This course is a major contribution to the "non-Western" approaches that many interculturalists have been seeking for many years.

Reference:

S. Yamamoto, T. Ishiguro, M. Bennett & D. Okabe (2022), *Experiencing Intercultural Communication: Growing up with Differentness*. Sanshusha (written in Japanese).