

# [Exorcising dust - a reflection on cultural differences in understanding ads](#)

## **Exorcising dust - a reflection on cultural differences in understanding ads**

The paper at hand demonstrates a methodology of teaching intercultural differences, based on an exercise using the analysis of advertisements. The method was used in two MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) called cope 14 and cope 15 and, in slightly adapted form, in a lecture in cross-cultural management on Bachelor Level. This method aims at reflecting the own expectations on how the other side will react to different marketing messages and to learn about cultural differences by comparing these expectations with actual feedback. In the MOOCs students researched ads, which they considered worthwhile for discussion and presented them on the online platform, together with their own opinion or interpretation, asking their colleagues for theirs. The resulting media gallery and the connected discussions on different social media, demonstrate the scope and reach of this student centred teaching method. In total more than 600 media were presented, analysed and discussed. On the Bachelor level, more than 150 students from two courses in Austria and India had the task to choose ads, they believed to be understood differently by the other side and reflect on those expected differences. After the reflection was done and the expectations have been put to paper, the students had the opportunity to transmit the ads to their colleagues and ask them concrete questions about what they think about them. Example ads from both learning environments are presented, analysed and discussed concerning the differences found between the expectations of one side and the real feedback of the other side. The results clearly indicate, that cultural dimensions could be used to explain some, but not all - or even the majority of all upcoming issues and that alternative models of explanation need to be used. The use of student centred learning scenarios proved to be a powerful way for teaching intercultural management issues.

## **1 Introduction**

The educational landscape in Europe is changing. Paradigm changes cause universities all over the world to rethink their teaching concepts. (European University Association, 2008; Ernst & Young 2012). Universities need to find ways to adopt to the new trends and to offer teaching, which is student-centred and output oriented. (Ernst & Young 2012; The Economist 2014).

Student centered means to put the students, but not the teaching staff in the centre of attention. "Student-centred learning is a broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs and/or cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his own advances in education." (Nanney 2004, p. 1) The role of the teacher is - in this context - changing from lecturer to moderator or coach. Output oriented refers to a competence based teaching style, which is primarily setting the competence of the students, not the contents of the teaching into the centre of interest; as opposed to the input, meaning those elements which have been taught - which is often a relevant difference. The set aim is, from this point of view, to allow the students to solve actual tasks in a competent way, not just to be able to show that they know the theory by heart (compare Baumann & Benzing 2013). The term

knowledge transfer has been replaced with training competences. It is not aim anymore to grade what students know, but what they can actually do with this knowledge. "In the last years the term competence has been established as new term of reference in all educational sectors and has - at least for some time - replaced qualification and education." (Zürcher 2010, p. 2, own translation). Curriculum and syllabus adaptation has, in this context, often been faster than creating competence based learning activities and assessments. A competence based assessment of students is still not done in all educational institutions. Erpenbeck is - in this context - even speaking of a kind of war: "A war for the best, for those having competencies to act as high potentials, for competences and competent, which, if you like, could be called talents. Winner in this world-wide war will be those, who will command the best methods for measuring and training competences. Competence mathematics is a relevant topic for the future with enormous reach." (Erpenbeck 2008, p. 1, own translation).

The term competence itself is, as so many other terms in the social science, not defined exactly and often discussed. The current paper follows the definition of Erpenbeck und von Rosenstiel (2007), they define competences as dispositions for self-organization, skills of persons which enable them to act in a self-organized, creative way, in situations new to them.

What we currently need are teaching activities, which fit the paradigm change discussed above, optimized for higher education and a competence based approach. The paper aims to demonstrate how learning activities can be successfully adapted to this new paradigm and to discuss advantages and disadvantages. This is done using examples from an exercise designed for teaching intercultural differences, which was used in two MOOCs and in slightly adapted form in a Bachelor level course.

## 2 Making cultural differences visible

Communication across cultural borders is difficult. It does not matter if this communication should happen between nations, institutions or simply between two people from different cultures, it can always result in unexpected perceptions and reactions. It can be interesting, challenging, funny, complex, problematic, surprising, a great experience or just boring. Intercultural communication depends strongly on how we understand our own culture and which differences we expect to find when comparing our own with other cultures. Depending on the situation we might find this differences to be positive or negative. Culture describes, how people understand the reality around them, but it is not just a product of the community, it is more personal, half-way between human nature and our own preferences and traits. "Culture hides more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants." (Hall 1976)

While the individual perspective of the traditional concept of culture was marked "by primary collectivity and attributive congruence" (Hansen 2009b), modern concepts of culture realize that culture has, in a globalized world, grown into a much more "fuzzy" concept (Bolten 2013). Every one of us is understood to be part of growingly complex network of relations, which form a very individual "culture". This more complex view of culture cannot easily be analysed or understood just by using simple methods, which reduce it to a number of linear dimensions (Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1998; House et al. 2004).

"The claim of differentiation as a characteristic of cultural customs is closely related to the developments in the field of individual collective membership. While the traditional concept of culture understood this relationship between individuals and their collectives to be one marked by primary collectivity, the accelerating increase in the number of available collectives and their mutual influence demands a fundamental revision." (Hansen 2009b)

As Bolten (2013) points out, we still need to be cautious on to hastily adopt new approaches of how to understand and teach culture. Cultural contexts are still determined by homogeneity assumptions: generalizations and stereotyping are still often used even in cases where more differentiated perspectives should be used. One way of teaching about cultural differences is to learn about one's

own cultural baseline, reflecting on own perceptions and comparing these with the expectations and finally real reactions of “the other side”.

## 2.1 Teaching methodology

Making cultural differences visible and tangible is a central part of learning about intercultural interaction and communication. In the bachelor course for intercultural management theories about culture are presented and demonstrated using examples and case studies. To facilitate this process different media (audio, video, and printed cases) are used. The format of the course itself is a short lecture with one semester hour. About 65 students participate.

The following exercise was developed in this course: Students had the task to find specific ads, of which they believed that they would be understood differently in another culture, in case of this year’s exercise specifically in India.

The first step was to purposefully select ads and describe elements, of which the students expected, that the Indian colleagues would interpret the message differently than themselves. The students needed to document in writing, what they believed the Indian colleagues perception to be. In a second step, the expectations of the students were compared with reality. To do this, the students were asked to send the ads and a set corresponding questions to colleagues in India. While the notion that different interpretations exist is trivial, the formulation of questions to investigate their understanding is not. The answers to these questions were used to judge the real reaction of the other side and finally to compare it with the own expectations – often with surprising and spectacular results.

A variant of this exercise was also provided in scope of a MOOC. MOOCs are a global educational phenomenon, the term is an abbreviation for “Massive Open Online Courses”, which might be one of the most important factors for the digital educational revolution (The Economist 2014). “Massive” stands for a near limitless number of learners; “open” defines the content as being accessible for the public, no one is excluded; “online” describes the web-based nature and “course” finally defines it is a structured learning method for a specific topic, including learning aims. (Treeck, Himpl-Gutermann & Robes 2013). Learners all over the world, which have an internet access, internet media competence and the respective language skills, can inscribe in MOOCs.

As a university of applied sciences FH JOANNEUM is always interested to use new learning methods and to adapt the possibility to study to the new teaching environment and to stakeholder requirements. As such FH JOANNEUM offered a MOOC with the name “Competences for Global Collaboration – cope14” in 2014, which was repeated 2015 as “cope15”. This MOOC was aimed to include students and staff from FH JOANNEUM and Partner universities, but was also open for other participants from all over the world.

In one module of this MOOC, the participants had the task to find advertisements, which they considered typical for their own culture and to present them to the community. The resulting media gallery and the connected discussions on the platform itself and in different social media, demonstrate the scope and quality of this student centred task.

Possibilities for learning have proven to be vastly different for students from different areas and institutions. The learning processes which have been started through this exercise, have not been the same for each person, but have been strongly depending on how much a person has been immersed in the task and how much he or she has been involved in different discussions. The variety of links and comments offered was immense and everyone had the possibility to create a very personal learning path.

In total (in both MOOCs together) more than 600 advertisements have been presented and discussed. All of these have been found, analysed and presented by the participants themselves. The content, which resulted from this enormous number of postings and comments was so large and diverse, that it can be safely assumed, that no single lecturer would have had the chance to produce a similar learning environment. Through the answers from students from different cultures and

fields of study many differences in perceptions of these ads became obvious.

### 3 Examples

In one example for the Bachelor course, the students have were an advertisement (Dirt Devil 2011), which shows, in homage to the movie "The Exorcist" a Catholic Pater, who is called to a house, were he finds a young woman, which shows all signs of possession. She is even floating close to the ceiling. In the next scene the camera is slowly sweeping up to the next floor, were an older woman is vacuuming the carpet. It becomes obvious that the floating woman is following the movements of the vacuum cleaner. The students noted the following: "We were quite unsure, whether the concept of a devil does even exist within the Indian Culture, or within the Hindu Religion. Even if it is a well-known concept in India, we wanted to know, if fighting the Devil by exorcism was a thing that people from the Indian culture knew, and what they were thinking about it." After their own analysis, they presented the video to their Indian colleagues, who answered: "In our Indian culture the concept of devil is present but we don't use it in day to day interactions. Devil is used in a negative connotation so we generally do not link any product with the characteristics of the devil and here devil is used to refer dirt. So anything which is unclean is being pulled by the vacuum cleaner as the girl in the advertisement is also unclean (possessed) she is being pulled by the vacuum cleaner."



Figure 1: Dirt devil spot

Source: dirtdevil-exorcist.com (2011)

Another group of students reported the following: "Finally, it needs to be mentioned that our initial second advertisement was a poster of the underwear company, Palmers, which exposed five women half naked, lying on their bellies. It was an ad about see-through tights which has been displayed for many weeks in several Austrian cities and suburbs. Our Indian colleagues refused to even comment on this ad, thus we decided to offer another commercial. This was probably the most significant cultural differences we got to experience through this valuable project.

The exercise in the MOOCs also produced interesting results. In one example the students chose an advertisement from Almdudler (2012) in which an obviously German tourist is hiking and somewhere in the alps shouts the - at least in Austria - well know slogan "If they don't have Almdudler, I will return home!", the echo surprisingly answers with "Pfiat di!", which, in Austrian dialect means - in a friendly way - bye, bye.



Figure 2: Almdudler Spot  
Source: horizont.at (2012)

This video cannot be easily understood for persons, which are not from Austria or Germany. In the discussion about this video many different perspectives and opinions came up. Topics, which discussed were: the value of regional references in an advertisement, the relation between Austrians and Germans, the creation of simple and easy to remember messages or political correctness (and incorrectness). The discussion of the different topics happens in different platforms and media and is not always visible for the facilitator. Interestingly, very few perceptions or opinions, which might not have been well reflected or thought through when first mentioned remain unopposed, even without the facilitator intervening.

Numerous other examples, which led to the discussion of different topics, could be mentioned here. Especially messages from advertisements, which are much more aggressive and energetic or much more philosophical and thoughtful than what is usually used in Austria or Germany have been presented. For example an advertisement from Turkey (Never say no to Panda, 2010) was discussed, which aims at advertising cheese. Should the consumer not immediately take (and enjoy) the offered cheese, a Panda appears, which is immediately, brutally and directly showing his disagreement (e.g. by smashing the office).

## 4 Discussion

While in the first version of the exercise the own opinion can easily be cross-checked with the target culture, often showing that the own expectations about the reaction of a target culture are not met, the second version allows to produce a large amount of examples and opinions in a relatively short time and allows to see how different reactions can be. Both exercises lead to an immediate understanding about the problems of perception, which is mostly filtered by our own culture and how difficult it can be to try to apply schemata or typologies on a foreign, unknown culture as any application of such would also be dependent on our own cultural filter.

Using the example of “exercising dust” it can be easily understood that the underlying concepts are related to different layers of culture (Schein 2010). The Austrian students referred to the act of exorcism as a ritual and the meaning of the devil as a symbol, which are, according to Schein both situated in the first “artefact” layer of culture. The Indian students referred to the underlying basic assumption of “unclean” entities and their meaning in Indian philosophy and religion. It would be very difficult indeed to explain the differences between the Austrian student’s expectations and the real Indian student’s reaction, with the use of cultural dimensions as defined by Hofstede (1991) or Trompenaars (1998), which do not allow for taking these different layers into account. This is an important message for students, who just learned about cultural dimensions as one way of analysing cultural differences. While these models might provide powerful tools they should not be over interpreted.

While it is of course trivial to find if cultural differences in the understanding of the “Almdudler”

spot exist, the analysis of the own expectation of how others would understand it is not. The MOOC platform made it possible to understand the sheer multitude of factors which influence the understanding of this (or essentially any other) ad. While some of the participants considered the question of the importance of political correctness in advertisements the central element for discussion for this ad, others were focussing on completely different elements like the regional impact or the formulation of short easily to remember slogans. For some persons this specific ad was offending, for some it was annoying, for some funny and for other simply weird. It is an important lesson that receiving the meaning of a message is dependent not only from the sender or the content of the message, but also from the receiver (von Thun, 2013) and that culture can add an additional layer of complexity.

The results demonstrate clearly that learning about cultural dimensions (e.g. Hofstede, Trompenaars) to understand foreign cultures cannot be sufficient and the reflecting your own cultural baseline is of utmost importance. In the current globalized world with "multicollective persons and polycollective cultures" (Hansen 2009) it is imperative to look at the topic culture in a new open minded way. Cultural dimensions, like the ones proposed by Hofstede et al.(1991) or by Trompenaars and Hampton-Turner (1998) will still serve their purpose to make fast cultural comparisons, which are easy to understand, but they cannot really mirror the fast changing, growingly complex cultural mix, that usually forms "the other side". Student centred, output oriented approaches, which aim to allow for the students to make their own experience in a secure, protected environment might be one way to go, as they at least allow to grasp the complexity of the issues involved.

## 4.1 Limitations

While the presented teaching methodology allows for comparing expectations with real reactions, and allows for making the complexity of the topic visible, it does not provide any answers for how to handle these differences or how to successfully adapt one's own view. Learning about the differences in perceptions does not automatically make a student an intercultural competent person. As such the existing methodology can only serve as an entry point for students to get deeper involved into the topic. As with any student centered methodology the teaching person needs to move from the classic position of a lecturer to one of a moderator or coach. This involves a loss of power over the teaching process and moves this power to the students or even to external persons (e.g. students in India) with all the connected advantages and disadvantages. While MOOCs might allow for powerful open learning scenarios, they also allow a student to get lost in topics and discussions, which are not aiming at the original learning content anymore. Students which are not aiming to stay focused can as such easily end up learning something completely different or even contradictory to the original learning aims formulated by the moderator, which might be an advantage or disadvantage.

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## Klíčové slová/Key Words

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## Résumé

“Vyháňanie prachu” - úvaha o kultúrnych rozdieloch pri pochopení reklamy

Tento článok demonštruje metodiku výučby interkultúrnych rozdielov založených na cvičení s využitím analýzy reklám. Táto metóda bola použitá v dvoch MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) s názvom “vyrovnať 14 a vyrovnať 15” a mierne upravenej podobe pri výučbe interkultúrneho manažmentu na bakalárskej úrovni. Táto metóda má za cieľ odrážať vlastné očakávania o tom, ako bude druhá strana reagovať na rôzne marketingové správy a dozvedieť sa o kultúrnych rozdieloch

porovnaním týchto očakávaní s reálnou spätnou väzbou. V týchto kurzoch študenti skúmajú reklamy, ktoré sú považované za užitočné pre diskusiu a prezentované na on-line platforme a spolu s ich názorom alebo výkladom sa pýtajú svojich kolegov na ten ich. Výsledná vzorka médií a k tomu prislúchajúca diskusia o rôznych sociálnych médiách, ukazujú rozsah a dosah tejto na študentov orientovanej vyučovacej metódy. Celkovo bolo prezentovaných, analyzovaných a prediskutovaných viac ako 600 médií. Na úrovni bakalárskeho štúdia viac ako 150 študentov z dvoch skupín v Rakúsku a Indii malo za úlohu vybrať reklamy, pri ktorých verili, že budú pochopené rôzne a bude nutné premýšľať o týchto rozdieloch. Po tomto pohľade boli očakávania umiestnené na papier, študenti mali možnosť prezentovať reklamy svojim kolegom a pýtať sa ich konkrétne otázky o tom, čo si o nich reálne myslia. Ukážkové reklamy z oboch prostredí boli prezentované, analyzované a prediskutované s prihliadaním na rozdiely zistené medzi očakávaniami a reálnou spätnou väzbou na druhej strane. Výsledky jasne ukazujú, že kultúrne dimenzie by mohli byť použité na vysvetlenie niektorých, ale nie všetkých - ale dokonca väčšiny problémov, a že je potrebné použiť alternatívne modely vysvetľovania. Využitie scenárov učenia orientovaného na študentov sa ukázalo byť účinným spôsobom pre výučbu problematiky interkultúrneho manažmentu.

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