

# Interkulturelle Pädagogik

Band 14

Ilse Born-Lechleitner, Evelyne Glaser (Hg.)

Interkulturelle Kompetenz:  
vermitteln, erwerben, anwenden

Teaching, Acquiring and Applying  
Intercultural Competence

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# **Making Students Aware of Their Own Culture and Intercultural Competence**

Marinel GERRITSEN

## **Rationale of the Project**

One of the main pedagogical objectives of this course in intercultural communication is to provide students with knowledge, insight, and skills that help them to function more effectively in intercultural encounters. In previous courses, it has often been taken for granted that students will have the same cultural values as those who are said to be exemplary of the country in which they have been raised. This, however, is not always the case as there can be significant individual variation within national cultures. The project discussed in this paper aims, in the first place, to measure the *individual* cultural values of each student in order to make them aware of their own cultural values, and consequently, their own culture-specific communicative conventions. Knowledge of these aspects should help them to tailor their communication to more closely match the culture of their conversation partners, and thus make their intercultural encounters more effective.

The second aim of the project is to measure the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of each student in order to raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and the pitfalls lurking in intercultural encounters.

## **Objectives of the Course and Teaching Tool Used**

The project discussed in this article is part of a first-year Bachelor course: Intercultural Communication for Business Communication students. This is presented to more than 200 students as a series of formal lectures over a seven-week period (two hours on Monday and two hours on Thursday). Students are expected to spend a total of 140 hours on the course. If they fulfil the requirements – to pass a written examination and write an essay – they receive five ECTS credits. The lecturer is allotted 90 hours to prepare the course, to lecture, to make and grade the written examination, and



to read and grade the essays. Although both the lecturer and the students would prefer smaller groups, the formal lecture format has been chosen for financial reasons; a seminar would cost nearly ten times as much.

In order to obtain their Bachelor's degree in Business Communication Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the students are required to achieve the following outcome in Intercultural Communication:

*Students will have knowledge and insight into the way differences between cultures affect communication, and be able to apply this knowledge and insight in real-life cases. (Study Guide Bachelor Communication and Information Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen 2013)*

The first-year course, Intercultural Communication, contributes to achieving this final outcome by fulfilling the following five learning objectives:

1. Knowledge of the most important theories on differences between cultures in values and the ability to reflect critically on these theories.
2. Insight into the communicative consequences of these cultural differences in values.
3. Insight into the aspects of language use and communication that distinguish cultures from each other.
4. Ability to reflect on their own communicative behaviour, and to communicate from the perspectives of their own cultural background, the cultural background of their interaction partners, and the interaction between these different backgrounds.
5. Insight into the different approaches to dealing with cultural differences and the ability to determine which approach is most suitable in which context and situation.

The aim of the project is to provide students with tools that will help them to communicate successfully in an intercultural context (learning objective 4). The learning objectives 1, 2, and 3 are fulfilled by the lectures, and learning objective 5 by an intercultural e-mail project (Gerritsen & Verckens 2006).

The teaching tool that is used to give students insight into their own cultural backgrounds consists of assignments that measure the cultural values and the intercultural competence of the students via the digital learning environment Blackboard at the Radboud University Nijmegen.

In the following section, we will describe the project that deals with the cultural values of the students and in the next one, we go into the part that deals with their intercultural competence.

## Measuring Cultural Values

We teach our students sixteen cultural values that originate from different cultural specialists such as Hall (1959, 1966, 1983), Hofstede (2001), Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), Trompenaars (1993), Trompenaars, and Hampden-Turner (1997). Although attention is paid to the different value models developed by each of these cultural specialists, and to the methods they used to identify the values of their models, we deal with each of the sixteen values in a scheme that we developed ourselves (Claes & Gerritsen 2011). We developed such a scheme to deal with the fact that some values occur in the value models of more than one culture specialist. For example, the value *collectivism-individualism* occurs in nearly all value models. If we were to discuss each of the value models of the culture specialists separately there would be a lot of overlap. Figure 1 presents the sixteen values dealt with in the Intercultural Communication course. Our arrangement of the values is highly inspired by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), and it is remarkable that all the values found later fit perfectly into their scheme of six basic values (see Fig. 1).

It is a fact that we pay special attention to the values of the Netherlands, because the majority of our students are Dutch. Since we realize that not all the residents of a country have the same values, we consider it important for the students to gain insight into their own personal values. To do this, we had students fill in questionnaires that measure their values. If a validated questionnaire was available for the measurement of a certain value, we used that questionnaire. For example, for the values *collectivism*, *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *masculinity*, and *Confucian dynamism*, we used the questionnaires that Hofstede uses for measuring these values on an individual level (ITIM), and for *polychrony*, we used Bluedorn et al. (1999). For other values – *human nature*, *particularism-universalism*, *neutral-affective*, *achievement*, *personal space*, *past-present-future*, *private-public*, *specific-diffuse*, *person-nature* – we used cases we developed ourselves and/or found in the literature (Trompenaars 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Although we discuss the most recently discovered value with the students in class, *indulgent-restraint*, reported in Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), we have not yet incorporated this value into the project.

Figure 2 gives an example of the questions used to measure the *masculinity* index of each individual student, and Figure 3 shows the questions

1. Human Nature
2. Human Relations
– Collectivism-Individualism
– Power distance
– Particularism-Universalism
– Neutral-Affective
– Achievement
3. Activity
– Uncertainty Avoidance
– Masculinity-Femininity
– Indulgence-Restraint
4. Time
– Past-Present-Future
– Polychrony-Monochrony
– Confucian Dynamism
5. Space
– Personal space
– Private-Public
– Specific-Diffuse
6. Person-Nature

Figure 1. Values dealt with in the first-year Bachelor course, Intercultural Communication.

the students have to answer in order to gain insight as to whether they are more *specific*, *diffuse*, or *in-between*. The questions are translated here into English, but they are presented to the students in Dutch because the course is taught in Dutch.

Students are obliged to fill in the online questionnaire for a certain value before this value is discussed in the lecture. This is done to ensure, as much as possible, that they answer the questions with an open mind, and do not try to give answers that fit in with the values that, according to theory, the Dutch *should* have. The teacher can verify the point in time when students completed a certain assignment, and consequently, also see whether students answered the questions before the deadline.

I feel most comfortable when

People sympathise with the underdog and tend to be jealous of the success of others	1	2	3	4	5	People admire the top-dog and blame the unsuccessful
At work, people are motivated by a pleasant work environment, warmth, and "cosiness"	1	2	3	4	5	At work, people are motivated by clear-cut targets and strict accountability to demonstrate their level of achievement
People try to reach consensus at work and colleagues are not supposed to compete against each other	1	2	3	4	5	People see confrontations as positive and fruitful; one should compete or die
Both men and women can be tender and concerned and focused on material success, with quality of life issues	1	2	3	4	5	Men are supposed to be assertive and focused on material success, while women are supposed to be more modest and concerned with quality of life issues
Lovers look for intimacy	1	2	3	4	5	Lovers look for emotional support

Figure 2. The questions used to measure masculinity.

Immediately after students have answered the questions that measure a certain value, they receive the results of the measurement. For example: "Your result for this assignment is: 37" or "Your answers for this assignment are 1a, 2a, 2b". At that moment, the student has no idea what these results mean. That will be explained in the lecture a week after the deadline of the assignment.

The teacher discusses the different aspects of each of the sixteen values in Figure 1 in the lecture: the meaning; the distribution around the world; the possible origins; the impact of the value on business, education, and religion; and aspects that are related to the value. Finally, the lecturer reveals



Select the answer that best reflects your own opinion.

1. One can only do business with persons one knows well, for example, who their friends are, what their political engagement is, which preference they have for art, literature, music, and how they think about life.
  - a) No
  - b) Yes
  - c) Partly agree, partly disagree
2. Your boss asks you to help him paint his house next weekend. What is your answer?
  - a) No
  - b) Yes
3. If one of your colleagues does something wrong in the workplace, you can tell him. This will not harm your relationship with him or her.
  - a) No
  - b) Yes
  - c) Partly agree, partly disagree

Figure 3. The questions used to measure specific-diffuse.

which of the completed student assignments measured the value just discussed, and shows the results the students obtained in PowerPoint slides. These slides are presented in Figure 4 and Figure 5 for the value *masculinity*, and in Figure 6 for *specific-diffuse*.

Answers in 2012 202 students, 2011 198 students

On the basis of the students' results, the lecturer addresses four topics around values. These will be illustrated below, based on the scores of the students for the values *masculinity* and *specific-diffuse*.

In the first place, the *score for the value of the students* is discussed. The lecturer explains that for *masculinity*, the lowest score a student can obtain is 0, which means that he or she is very feminine; and that the highest score a student can obtain is 100, which means that he or she is very masculine (Figure 4). With the help of the graph presented in Figure 5, it is shown that

- 0=feminine, 100=masculine
- Mean of the whole group 35.9 (last year 34.4)
- Range 10-75 (last year 5-60)
- Standard deviation 10.96 (last year 10.65)
- Hofstede (2001), Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov (2010) for the Netherlands: 14

Don't forget your result!

Figure 4. PowerPoint slide used to discuss the results of the students for the value, masculinity.

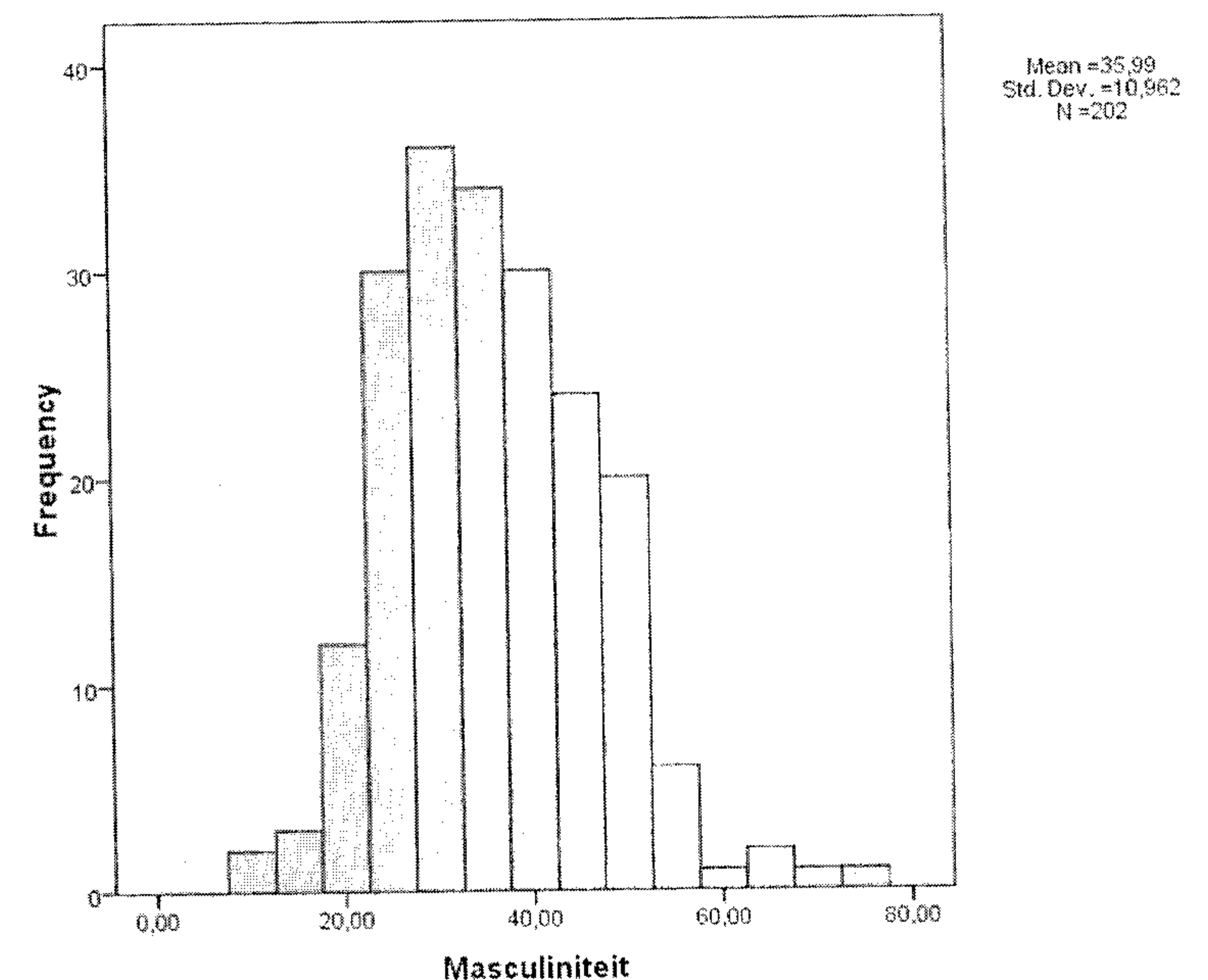


Figure 5. PowerPoint slide used to show the spread of the results for the value masculinity.

the scores for all the students are concentrated around 30, 40, and 50, which indicates the majority of the students are neither very feminine nor very masculine. Regarding the value, *specific-diffuse*, the lecturer first explains which answer is *specific*, which is *diffuse*, and which is in between (Figure

Percentages in left column: answers from 2012 (202 students); in right column answers from 2011 (198 students) Trompenaars (1993, 98): The Netherlands are very specific

1. One can only do business with persons that one knows well; for example, who their friends are, what their political engagement is, which preference they have for art, literature, music, and how they think about life.

a. No (specific)	66%	58%
b. Yes (diffuse)	0,6%	1,2%
c. Partly agree, partly disagree (both)	34%	41%

2. Your boss asks you to help him paint his house next weekend. What is your answer?

a. No (specific)	80%	69%
b. Yes (diffuse)	20%	31%

3. If one of your colleagues does something wrong in the workplace you can tell him. This will not harm your relationship with him or her.

a. No (diffuse)	1%	0%
b. Yes (specific)	62%	69%
c. Partly agree, partly disagree (both)	37%	40%

Don't forget your result!

Figure 6. PowerPoint slide used to discuss the results of the students for the value specific-diffuse

6), and subsequently shows that the majority of the students are *specific*. Furthermore, the lecturer emphasizes that students have to know their own individual results. The written examination tests whether students know their value scores and whether they are able to apply this knowledge in their intercultural interactions (cf. learning objective 4 in section 2). Figure 7 gives an example of such a written examination question.

The lecturer takes four aspects into consideration when assessing the answers of the students. First, whether the student knows her or his values – the lecturer can check whether the student indeed used her or his own scores because (s)he has access to the scores of the students. Second, whether the student is able to trace the differences in values between him or herself and the female colleague described in the assignment. Third, whether the student realizes which communication breakdowns might result from the

Imagine that together with a female colleague from Austria who has the values given below, you have to write an annual report for your company.

Individualism: 55  
 Power distance: 11  
 Masculinity: 79  
 Uncertainty avoidance: 70  
 Monochrone  
 Confucian dynamism: 31  
 Specific

a) Describe the problems you would expect to encounter on the basis of the differences between her values and your values. Refer to your own values resulting from the Blackboard assignments you completed during the course.

b) Describe how to avoid these problems.

Figure 7. Example of a written examination question that tests whether a student knows her or his own values and is able to apply this knowledge

different cultural backgrounds during the process of collaboratively writing an annual report. Fourth, whether the student is able to create strategies to avoid such communication breakdowns.

In the second place, the lecturer addresses *consistency and changes over time for the given value*. To that end, a comparison is made between the results of the current group and the results of the students from last year. For example, for the values presented in Figures 4 and 6, *masculinity* and *specific-diffuse*, it is shown that there are not many differences between these two groups. It is stated that for more than 10 years, similar results have been obtained for students of similar groups, and that this suggests these results are reliable.

In the third place, a comparison is made between these results and the results of the culture specialists. Regarding *specific-diffuse*, the results are completely in line with Trompenaars' findings for the Netherlands (1993, 98); he states that the Dutch are very *specific*. Regarding *masculinity*, however, there is a striking difference between our results and those of Hofstede. Whereas Hofstede (2001) reports a *masculinity* index of 14 for the Dutch,



the scores obtained for more than a decade among the group of students is around 35. This suggests that the Dutch have become more *masculine* than reported by Hofstede. Subsequently, we seek to find whether one of the two studies is unreliable, or if it is plausible that a change has taken place in Dutch society. To that end, students are asked to mention recent changes in Dutch society that are in line with a rise in masculinity. Subjects such as changes in the tax system, in developing aid, in student grants, etc. are reviewed.

In the fourth place, the lecturer addresses *methodological aspects of value research*, raising questions such as the following:

- Does the high standard deviation and range (see Figure 4) within a rather homogeneous group such as first-year Business Communication students at the Radboud University, Nijmegen justify generalizing results as representing the residents of a whole country?
- Why did Hofstede not report these high standard deviations?
- Did he not find them in his surveys?

### Measuring Intercultural Competence

At the end of the Intercultural Communication course, the students' intercultural competence is measured with the *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000). This questionnaire measures multicultural effectiveness, and is, for example, used for the selection of expatriates. This validated measuring instrument consists of 91 5-point scale questions that measure five components of intercultural competence: *cultural empathy*, *open-mindedness*, *social initiative*, *emotional stability*, and *flexibility*.

Each student obtains their individual results for each of the five components. The meaning of the results is discussed in the lecture for each component with the help of PowerPoint slides as presented in Figure 8.

The lecturer explains to the students that it is useful to know their own score in order to improve intercultural interactions. If, for example, one has low scores on *flexibility* and/or *emotional stability*, one has to realize that this might create a pitfall in intercultural interactions; therefore, one should try to be more flexible. If one has low scores on *social initiative* and/or *open-mindedness*, one should try to find a (business) partner who scores high on these features. In short, the lecturer tries to show that knowledge

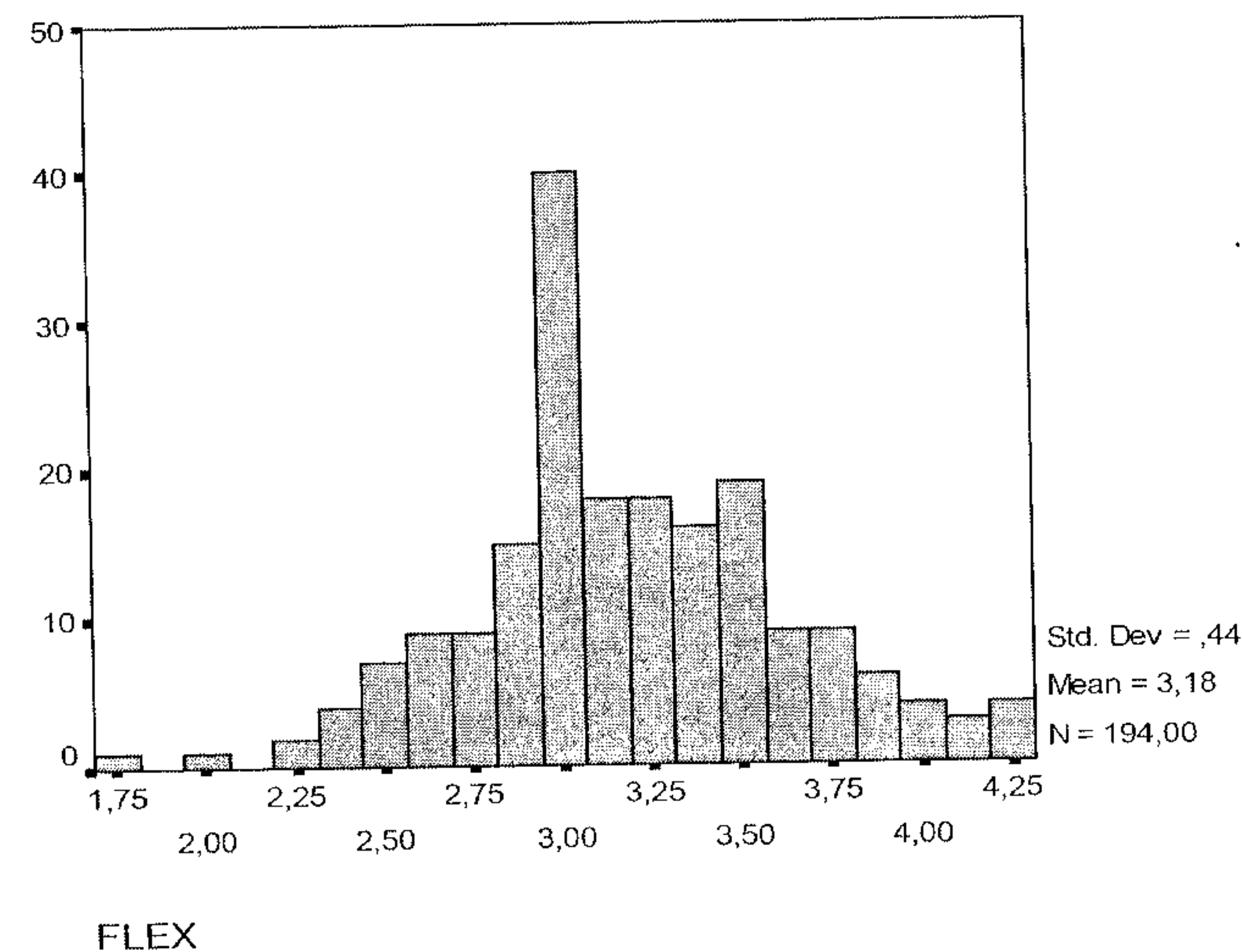


Figure 8. PowerPoint slide used to discuss the results of the students for the component Flexibility of intercultural competence (1=low, 5=high)

about the strong and weak components of one's intercultural competence is a helpful device for facilitating intercultural interactions.

It is interesting to point out that the students generally have high scores on *cultural empathy* (due to the course?), low scores on *flexibility* and *emotional stability*, and average scores on *social initiative*. Many students are disappointed with these results because they had expected to have a high intercultural competence. They have often chosen Business Communication Studies because they aim at an international business career.

### Did We Meet the Learning Objectives?

An important question is, of course, whether we have been able to meet our learning objective with the project discussed here (section 2): developing the students' ability to reflect on their own communicative behavior, and to communicate from the perspective of their own cultural background, the cultural background of their interaction partners, and the interaction between these different backgrounds.

Given the fact that the majority of the students were able to answer the written examination questions related to the project in a sensible way, we

believe we met the learning objective. That also appears to be confirmed in the anonymous written evaluations of the course. The students very much appreciated that the project gave them a better insight into themselves, and helped them to realize aspects of life that are learned during primary socialization are not universal. The students also realized that differences in values may be a source of communication breakdowns – even in interactions between persons who are born and raised in the same country – as is shown by the following quote:

It was very interesting to gain an insight into my own values. I asked my boyfriend to do the test too, and when we compared the results we both realized why we sometimes have problems with each other.

Another student wrote: *I like the fact that I know now on which aspects of my intercultural competence I still have to work.*

### Advantages and Disadvantages

It has been shown that the project discussed here helps students to improve their intercultural interactions. From the perspective of the student, it can be called a successful project. In this last section, we will briefly discuss disadvantages and advantages of the project for the lecturer.

A disadvantage of the project is that it requires a lot of work to integrate the questionnaires into a digital learning environment. The questions for each of the values and components of intercultural competence have to be imported along with the formulas that calculate the individual scores. The author of this article had to call in an ICT-manager for that job. A second problem is that if the lecturer wants to assess whether the students know their results, and whether they realize what the implications of these results are for their intercultural encounters, it is quite a lot of work to check the examinations when many students are involved.

A first advantage of the project is that it allows an individual approach to the student – even when large groups of students take part in the course – because each student obtains her or his individual results. A second advantage is that once the questionnaires have been installed, the lecturer can use them as often as wanted. A third advantage is that the workload for analyzing the results (i.e. the PowerPoint slides as presented in Figures 5, 6 and 8), is the same whether 20 or 100 students are involved. Last, but not

least, a further advantage is that the lecturer can easily collect an extensive data base that can be used for research into areas such as consistency and changes over time in values, or changes in the intercultural competence of students during the course of their study.

### Notes on the contributor

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Interkulturelle Kompetenz  
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# INTERKULTURELLE KOMPETENZ: VERMITTELN, ERWERBEN, ANWENDEN

Teaching, Acquiring and Applying  
Intercultural Competence