

# Preparing Future Diplomats for Cross-cultural Communication under the Impact of Digitalization, Remote Work and Closed Borders

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to develop research hypotheses based on a case description. This describes the experience with a scientifically-based training for groups of future diplomats in cross-cultural communication online during the pandemic 2020/21 and uses “lessons learned” to also develop a concept for improved training considering more distant-communication online between different cultures. The results of this case analysis show that the cultural dimension “high context vs low context communication,” as used in the work of Schroll-Machl, Hofstede or Mayer, play an important role in training Germans in cross-cultural communication. A strengthened training focus on “self-reflection” with the goal to define and reflect advantages and disadvantages of the personal (German) cultural imprint and its possible effect on others can make up for the lack of high-context communication in online settings. As a conclusion, the objective “Differences between online-communication and face-to-face communication and its implications for intercultural exchange” is added to the training concept. This paper suggests hypotheses for future research such as “Cross-cultural online communication requires more ‘low-context’ communication than face to face communication,” “Online communication eliminates context that is required for “low-context” communication styles.” And “Online intercultural trainings need new methods to teach low context communication, like virtual reality.”

## Article Info

Received January 3, 2022

Revised April 25, 2022

Accepted May 17, 2022

**Keywords:** Diplomats, Cultural standards, Training concept, Low context communication

## Introduction

The paper is based on observations on how a training on intercultural communication can work for German participants if the compulsion to communicate online leaves nearly no room to experience forms of high-context communication (Hofstede, 1991; Meyer, 2014; Schroll-Machl, 2002) unfamiliar to German culture.

Intercultural communication is a core competence for diplomacy, which is necessary for

communication across language and cultural boundaries. Common definitions of the term “diplomacy” make this clear.

In many languages, the term diplomacy as part of foreign policy is used to describe certain behavior. “In a positive sense, it is used to describe politeness, tact, prudence, courtesy and the like; in a negative sense, it has the meaning of artfulness or duplicity” (Karalus, 2009).

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Other definitions assume that diplomacy is the conduct of intergovernmental relations, as Satow puts it in his *Guide to Diplomatic Practices*: “Diplomacy is the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states” (Karalus, 2009, p. 11).

Therefore, if politeness, tact, prudence and courtesy are crucial, or even artfulness and ambiguity, these can only succeed if diplomats are able to behave appropriately in their host country, know the manners and can express themselves with purpose. For this reason, this article focusses on the training of diplomats in intercultural competences, especially from the perspective of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. It explores the question of how far the digitalization of training required by the Covid-19 pandemic influences the learning of intercultural competences outside a host country and how disadvantages could be compensated for, if necessary.

In this way, the article aims to make a practical contribution to the further development of the training of future diplomats, as well as to raise questions, where scientific consideration can improve acquisition of intercultural communication.

The procedure described in this article can be classified as a case study or case description, a qualitative scientific approach. It describes the challenges encountered in intercultural training as part of the general preparation of future diplomats as well as the scientifically based further development of this training due to requirements and challenges posed by the changing world during the covid-pandemic. The trainings at the beginning of 2020 (classic on-site training, approx. 80 participants) are compared with those at the beginning of 2021 (online-training, approx. 60 participants). Based on the changes made to training and the analysis of the results, the article also proposes some hypotheses for research.

### **The “Psychosocial Counselling in Internal Training in the Foreign Service” Setting**

The Foreign Service Academy is the training and further education institution of the German Federal Foreign Office and, as the “Foreign Affairs” department, part of the Federal University of Public Administration, which is responsible for the training of federal civil servants in the Federal Senior Civil Service. Intermediate civil servants and senior civil servants are also trained at the Foreign Service Academy.

### **Aspirant Coaching by the Psychosocial Counselling Service**

The Psychosocial Counselling Service supports Foreign Service aspirants as part of their internal training at the Foreign Service Academy. The so-called “aspirant coaching and training” has been a fixed component of the aspirants’ curriculum since 2014. It offers a continuous support with regard to psychosocial competencies needed for a life in the diplomatic service. Each year approximately 60 to 80 participants in each career-path, that are approximately 180-240 in total, take part in this training and coaching program.

Methods used are: structured interaction and exchange within the training group, Reflection on individual intercultural experiences, the cognitive and affective dimensions, as well as specific communication skills, the behavioral dimension (Gertsen, 1990). This focusses particularly on the students’ internship abroad, imparting knowledge on individual psychosocial topics such as the “culture shock model” (Oberg & Gullahorn, 1963), team development, dealing with stress and difficult clients/colleagues and strengthening of personal self-management and coping competencies. The trainings are of the type “culture general experiential” (Bolten, 2000) since this type’s advantages like interculturality can be experienced in mixed groups, holistic learning (cognition, feelings, action) and intensive self-awareness fit best to the setting and its training goals.

The intercultural training courses are compulsory before the internships at German missions abroad. Training goals are cross-cultural and non-culture-specific intercultural competences. When coming back from their internships participants will also visit re-entry seminars.

### **Basic Concept and Theoretical Basis of the Training**

The one-day training courses teach overarching intercultural competencies that enable future diplomats to get themselves acquainted with foreign cultures, to deal with challenges and irritations, and communicate successfully in their host-country.

Besides these general competences, to adapt to new environments, knowledge related to the host country as well as knowledge of the personal cultural imprint are considered to be important. Both areas of competence have been widely discussed by various authors – see e.g., Antor (2007), Nohl (2006), Grosch and Leenen (2006). In accordance with these findings there is a focus on participants’ knowledge of their own cultural imprint in relationship to other cultures. Due to the diversity of host countries worldwide, however, country-specific factual knowledge is not the subject of the trainings presented here.

The training courses are mainly based on the works of Edward Hall, Geert Hofstede, Sylvia Schroll Machl and Erin Meyer. A common thread of their work is so called “cultural dimensions” (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991; Meyer, 2014; Schroll-Machl, 2002) that allow to describe key characteristics of cultures, for example, “high context and low context communication.” Especially the online-trainings developed during the Covid-19 pandemic focus on this aspect of intercultural exchange because, as research shows, direct communication (as a characteristic of low context communication) is seen as very typical for Germans and also seems to be a characteristic of digitally transformed long distance communication in an online setting. As the aspirants are working for German embassies, they are representing the German culture and are meeting the expectation of being typically German, which is another reason to reflect these aspects in more detail.

### **Procedure/Contents of Diversity Workshop (Before the Covid-19 Crisis)**

The pre-corona workshops relied on simulation to allow for implicit and emotional experiences by trying out different forms of interaction. These were framed by theory or concepts and by discussions to ensure the participants’ reflection and helpful conclusions.

The objectives for a one-day training course (face-to-face) were: 1) reflection and exchange on personal intercultural experiences, 2) knowledge of intercultural concepts, 3) knowledge of general cross-cultural behavioral strategies, and 4) mental preparation for hands-on experiences that lie ahead during students’ first internship at an embassy abroad.

The training methods used during these training courses were mainly: group discussions to exchange individual experience prior to the course, experience-based exercises to understand and feel cross-cultural differences in body and mind, group discussions to reflect simulations and to lead to helpful conclusions, and information on concepts to support rational understanding and coping strategies.

### **A Training-Plan in Some Detail (Before the Covid-19 Crisis)**

For the on-site training, the group of 80 aspirants is split into four groups of twenty. The training starts with the introduction of trainers and participants, information on confidentiality, the training-agenda and an exchange of participants’ experiences with intercultural situations. A simulation with the complete group of twenty (with focus on verbal vs non-verbal communication) allows an experience-based start and discussion on

cross-cultural communication. The introduction of the Culture shock model (Gullahorn, 1963; Oberg, 1960) offers explanation and helps the group to integrate their experiences. The following presentation combines additional theoretical input with exercises in the plenum. The presentation covers the Cultural model “Iceberg” (Ruch & Zimbardo, 1974), a definition of cultural competence (Hofstede, 2006), a definition of culture (as “common features of a group”) and the “Culture triangle” (Schein, 1990). This is followed by a presentation on “Cultural standards” as discussed by Hofstede (1991) and Meyer (2014) – and a detailed introduction of five dimensions of culture: Dealing with time, (In-) acceptance of hierarchy and inequality, objectivism vs. relationship orientation, (in) direct communication, individualism vs collectivism - each with examples and discussion. The next group work phase with groups of four participants working on one dimension each, allows discussing and reflecting on the questions: “Where do I see the German culture?” “Where do I see myself personally on those dimensions?” the task to locate the German culture (and the participants’ individual imprints) on those intercultural dimensions. The exercise: “comfort zones” (individual comfort distance) focuses on a non-verbal aspect of differences between cultures. The participants are also asked to find advantages and disadvantages to the extreme manifestations of each cultural dimensions and to present their group discussion on this in plenum.

### **Workshops during the Covid-19 Crisis**

The Covid-19 crisis has brought about some challenges. The conditions for trainings have changed fundamentally. Work and learning during the crises take place digitally and predominantly at home. The usually frequent travelling of employees as well as aspirants has ceased nearly completely. Necessary travel (e.g., to take up a traineeship post) has been made much more difficult (e.g., through quarantine regulations). This results in significantly fewer opportunities to experience direct intercultural interaction and to gain personal experience.

For the trainings that means less intercultural experiences of the participants right before the training, a smaller area of application for the learnings and a different form for the training (online only during the pandemic).

The changes in conditions required quick adaptation of the outlined training concept, especially because training sessions take place digitally. The trainings were also offered for larger groups than before (up to 60 people instead of approx. 20). In order to achieve the same goals, it was necessary to adapt the methods.

Training methods, which were added to adopt to the new settings are the use of full group polls online. Online breakout sessions for small group discussions with four participants each to exchange individual experience prior to the course as well as breakout sessions of the same size to allow for cooperative problem solving in simulated cross-cultural interactions. A discussion

on the question “What helps to deal with Covid-19 crisis?” was added. The focus of the simulation was shifted to “high- and low-context communication in verbal communication” instead of “verbal vs non-verbal communication and atmosphere”. See Table 1 below for details.

**Table 1** Comparison of Trainings prior and during Covid-19 Pandemic

| <b>Onsite Training<br/>prior to Covid-19</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Online Training<br/>during Covid-19 Pandemic</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Learning objectives:</u><br>Germans tend to focus on verbal communication and what is explicitly said. Communication becomes more difficult (for our participants) if there is less verbal but more nonverbal communication. Less verbal communication requires interpretation of non-verbal cues and also interpretation of things that are left out and not mentioned. This interpretation requires knowledge of cultural context to be successful. | <u>Learning objectives:</u><br>Context information is crucial to interpret what is said. If the context is unknown or two people in a conversation assume a different context in that conversation, communication easily fails.                                |
| <u>Method:</u><br>Group-exercise simulating a complex communication task in a different culture, which allows participants to gain experience on all sensory levels, including the atmosphere in the room created by the physical presence and behavior of others.                                                                                                                                                                                       | <u>Method:</u><br>Online break-out sessions in pairs to simulate a conversation of two who interpret context information very differently in combination with self-reflection of personal experiences in the past, that support the learning from the exercise |

Overall, there was more time reserved for self-reflection to compensate the loss of implicit and intuitive experiences in a face-to-face contact (especially in simulations as well as in discussions with peers during the course). Added was also a model of German culture standards to have a scientifically backed basis for this self-reflection (Schroll-Machl, 2002) as well as an input to ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. A short experience-based part on the topic of Awareness (“Whodunnit” video by Major of London and Transport for London, 2008) completes the adapted training.

In a summary at the end statements like: “Do not take anything for granted,” “Avoid making judgements,” “Know your own imprints,” “Acknowledge your own feelings and those of others,” “Maintain openness and curiosity,” “Seek and emphasize things/habits, etc. having in common” were collected and discussed.

## **Lessons Learned (Remote vs Face-to-face) and Impact on Future Training Courses**

In the pre-corona training in the beginning of 2020 that was delivered in a very open way with many opportunities to react spontaneously to the people present. Many things did not need to be expressed explicitly, because the atmosphere and mutual experience would allow implicit learning. The training during the corona pandemic in the beginning of 2021 was much more planned and pre-structured. The limitations created by the online setting, had to be much more controlled to make sure a minimum content can be communicated. The evaluation of these two workshop types (remote vs face-to-face) reveals that during remote /online training sessions far fewer implicit learning effects, which are usually seen in face-to-face training sessions, could be observed.

During online trainings we observed fewer possibilities for implicit learning “on the side” due to less interaction in full groups, less shared context,

less implicit interaction in role play/simulation and less “feeling the atmosphere.”

We also observed limited interaction between students in the group and between students and teachers due to the fact that emotions are less visible for others and awareness / perception is limited mostly to seeing/hearing.

There also was less spontaneous steering of the learning process due to the great variety of students’ experience and learning-effects in breakout sessions, which also led to less trainer feedback and interpretation. A clear framework and planning can control the learning best that means more trust in the autonomous learning of participants is necessary.

A more limited form of communication could be observed during the training, which made it more difficult to show the intercultural variety that students encounter abroad. We observed much more direct communication, far more explicit verbal and written explanations, much more focus on rational explanations and more presentations instead of discussions and active problem solving.

That leads to the conclusion that direct communication is a vital part of online communication – high context communication is more or less absent in online training sessions.

To reach the learning goals in the new environment of the online training, ways to compensate the new limitations were developed.

For students with a typical German-culture-imprint, online-trainings mean they do more of what they are already good at and less of what they should train more (e.g., being aware of context). Looking at German students, it becomes obvious, that gaining a deeper awareness of their own cultural imprint (and its limits) becomes more important. Therefore, new training elements to reflect the personal cultural imprint became part of online training courses. Those new training elements are mainly based on the work of Schroll-Machl (2002).

### **Theoretical Background for the New Self-reflecting during the Training: Imprinting by Central German Cultural Standards**

The basis for the reflection unit, added to the training course, is the assumption that each culture has cultural standards (Schroll-Machl, 2002). These standards function as guideline how a typical representative of that culture behaves, thinks or feels in certain situations. The self-reflection during the course was conducted along the guidelines which we assume for the German culture. The next section explains those for the foreign readers who may be less familiar with them.

Sylvia Schroll-Machl’s (2002) research on how Germans perceive others and how they see themselves can be seen as a ‘tool’ “to be able to carry out the difficult act of reflecting on and recognizing one’s own cultural orientation system.” It also offers an excellent insight for foreigners working with Germans.

In the following, the central German cultural standards presented by Schroll-Machl are briefly introduced and the possible effects on third parties are highlighted. This is supplemented by an exemplary German proverb for each cultural standard. Working with proverbs is an excellent way to reflect on one’s own cultural imprint - this is regular feedback at the end of our training sessions.

Schroll-Machl considers the following cultural standards to be typical German. Her outcome is confirmed by current research (Meyer, 2014).

- Objectivism
- Appreciation for rules, regulations and structures
- Rule-oriented, internalized control
- Time planning
- Separation of personality and living spheres
- “Low context” as a communication style
- Individualism

These cultural aspects explain why the cultural imprint of Germans fit to the requirements of online-communication and minimize the already minimized opportunities to experience other cultures and their imprints. Explicit knowledge and facts instead of experience and learning by doing, more rules and structure online compared to onsite trainings, more strict time planning online, online trainings offer littler context, all that corresponds to Schroll-Machl’s findings on German cultural standards.

### **Schroll Machl’s Individual Cultural Standards and Their Potential Effect on Others**

#### ***Cultural Standard: Objectivism***

*“Der Zweck heiligt die Mittel.”*  
(“The end justifies the means”)

*German proverb*

Every encounter has at least two components: the objective or factual level and the relationship level. With German communication partners, the factual level is paramount, especially in a professional context.

In groups with a common work or study goal, personal contact will not necessarily occur. Coming physically close to a person can even be

irritating; it may even be perceived as embarrassing in some cases.

Clear and comprehensible formulation of a problem or issue is highly valued, and quickly "getting to the point" is the ideal ("Let's not beat about the bush!"). In the interest of the matter, criticism can be voiced by all participants regardless of their position in the hierarchy – this is even expected.

The opinion of experts is highly respected. Knowledge and competence are valued more highly than charisma and character.

The factual level influences the relationship level: If a factual agreement is not kept, this is interpreted as a breach of trust and possibly as contempt for one's own person ("A promise is a promise."). Concrete, written promises are taken very seriously. Failure to keep agreements leads to disappointment on the relationship level.

Feelings do not play a role in the work context; they are not paid attention to / taken seriously.

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- a German's affection must be earned through work or performance.
- effective, professional, competent, reasonable, logical, thrifty
- hurtful, cold, impersonal, stingy, petty, know-it-all
- violations on the emotional level due to approach being perceived as cold

**Cultural standard: Appreciation for rules, regulations and structures**

*"Lerne Ordnung, liebe sie. Sie erspart dir Zeit und Müh'."*

*("Learn order, love it. It saves you time and effort")*

*German proverb*

In Germany, there are countless rules, regulations, guidelines, etc. ... Compliance with rules is generally taken for granted; sometimes violations are even punished by completely uninvolved persons: *"That's not the way to do it, young man"*.

Ambiguities and uncertainties are often perceived as disturbing and avoided as much as possible. Improvisation is largely equated with emergency solutions. Living together is supposed to be organized clearly, comprehensibly and fairly, through rules.

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- Clarity, structure, justice, reliability – if you know the rules.
- Doing a lot of things wrong

- Control, over-regulation, little freedom and flexibility, no trust
- Germans find it difficult to tolerate chaos
- Little room for improvisation and creativity

**Cultural standard: Rule-oriented, internalized control**

*"Fast richtig ist ganz verkehrt."*  
*("Almost right is all wrong")*

*German proverb*

Germans stick to the rules for the most part, even without increased control. The motto is: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" If a project is set down in writing, it can almost be considered achieved.

Reliability and a sense of responsibility are among the most highly valued character traits in Germany. For Germans, it is strange to expect praise or recognition for merely sticking to an agreement or fulfilling an assumed or assigned task. One's own scope is perceived as responsibility and the necessary initiative is taken, i.e., work is done independently. The task is completed for its own sake.

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- reliability, responsibility, punctuality, discipline.
- things work
- inflexible (*"That's against the rules," "Where is that written?"*)
- serious, self-critical, strict
- not very relaxed, not much laughing
- little understanding for changes of mind and breaking the rules
- regulate things that do not need to be regulated at all

**Cultural standard: Time planning**

*"Zeit ist Geld."* (*"Time is money"*)

*German proverb*

*"Gott gab den Europäern die Uhr und den Afrikanern die Zeit"*

*("God gave the Europeans the clock and Africans the time")*

*African proverb*

Germans have a linear understanding of time. According to their rule-abiding attitude, Germans structure their day / life. Time schedules are aligned with factual requirements.

Timetables that cannot be adhered to are almost immediately replaced with new timetables. Working through a schedule or several tasks step by step is preferred to working on several tasks at the same time.

Punctuality and adherence to a schedule implicitly express respect for the negotiating partner. Unpunctuality, on the other hand, can be a demonstration of power.

Precise and strict time planning is also binding in the private sphere. The explanation: "I'm afraid I don't have time," e.g., in response to a question about an appointment, is often not an excuse but an expression of the need to keep to the schedule once it has been made.

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- pedantic, not very spontaneous, impatient
- precise timetable in private life is often interpreted as rejection
- reliable, predictable, slow
- hospitality by appointment only
- unstructured approach unsettles Germans; rigid adherence to schedule unsettles people of a different imprint and restricts them in their scope for action.
- perplexity about Germans being hurt by unpunctuality

**Cultural standard: Separation of personality and living spheres**

*"Dienst ist Dienst und Schnaps ist Schnaps"*  
(*"Duty is duty and schnapps is schnapps"*)

*German proverb*

In Germany, there is a separation of the life spheres. This is often accompanied by a clear separation of behavior. The following opposites characterize behavior: professional - private, role, function - person, rational - emotional, formal - informal

Antipathies only have an exclusionary effect in private contact; at work, they make cooperation more difficult, but do not prevent it.

Friendships among colleagues are not a natural expectation. They rarely develop at work or in the seminar group, but much more frequently and much more easily in leisure groups (clubs). Professional responsibilities play an important role. Leaving the official channels of information can be perceived as dishonest and thus dishonorable behavior. Strangers are only approached to help them find their way around, for example, not to make acquaintances. Questions about private life are unusual, especially towards people higher up in the hierarchy. Interaction with good acquaintances and friends, however, is characterized by openness and disclosure of personal details. Only on a friendly level are there gifts that are not equated with bribery.

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- Rejecting: "Nobody talks to me"
- Few opportunities for contact "It's so quiet on the underground"
- Once a friendship has been formed, it lasts for life
- "I'm not responsible for that" comes across as dismissive and unfriendly
- correct, pretentious, arrogant, formal

**Cultural standard: "Weak context" as a communication style**

*"Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen"*

(*"What you can't talk about, you have to keep quiet about"*)

*German proverb*

The German style of argumentation aims at convincing partners through facts and logical connections. What is said is meant and what is meant is said. There is little room for interpretation. Honesty is an elementary component of trusting relationships. Little information is understood outside of the context of what is being said – if you want something, you have to say it clearly. Criticism is expressed openly; praise is perceived as unnecessary (*"Nothing said is praised enough"*).

Frequent effect on people of a different imprint:

- cool, distant, help must be asked for, humorless, rude.
- encroaching (direct)
- clear, honest, reliable
- predictable
- critical, open to discussion
- anything said "between the lines" is not understood
- little small talk

**Cultural standard: Individualism**

*"Wer nicht kommt zur rechten Zeit, der muss seh'n, was übrig bleibt."*

(*"He who does not come at the right time must see what's left"*)

*German proverb*

In individualistic cultures, individual members define themselves as separate individuals. Their connections to each other tend to be loose and flexible. Each member is expected to take care of themselves (and their own family members). Personal independence and self-reliance are highly valued. Each bears responsibility for their own lives, their own decisions and also their own failures. People should be empowered to "take charge" of their own lives as early as possible and for as long

as possible. A certain amount of aloneness is perceived as necessary for mental health.

Members of individualistic cultures tend to perceive differences more often and more quickly than similarities.

Common effect on people of a different imprint:

- Left alone, lonely, little contact with family.
- Freedom, personal development possible
- own opinion is demanded
- independent, self-reliant
- The majority of the world's cultures are considered to be rather collectivistic. For people from collectivist cultures, the "we-form", i.e., belonging to a group, plays a prominent role. The "I-message" preferred by individualistic people is perceived as an expression of the desire to rise above others.

## Conclusions for an Updated Training Concept

The comparison of both trainings prior and during the Covid 19 pandemic (face-to-face [approx. 80 participants] and digital [approx. 60 participants]) shows that working only online during the pandemic leads to an extreme reduction of implicit learning, which is considered to be a vital part of intercultural trainings (Arnold, 2015). There seem to be no or very little comparisons of online and on-site cross-cultural trainings. Looking at the "The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Training" (Kallschmidt et al., 2020) for example or review articles on the topic of effectiveness of cross-cultural training, (e.g., Littrell et al., 2005, Mendenhall et al., 2004) a comparison of the effectiveness of different methods for online and onsite trainings is missing. In an older summary of evaluation-studies on cross-cultural trainings, Kinast (1998) points out that 95% of the people studied in evaluations of cross-cultural trainings were from the USA and that transferring the evaluation results to German participants is problematic.

For that reason, we would like to suggest improvements to our trainings based on this case description and reflect our case specific experiences. Since the case description is based on trainings for German participants, we expect that our suggestions fit especially for those.

*What We Would Like to Improve Further:* To meet the general demand for a change in communication to more digital communication, we would add an objective to our future intercultural trainings for the aspirants of the federal foreign academy: "Differences between online-

communication and face-to-face communication and its implications for intercultural exchange."

*What Changes Worked Well:* Students report to benefit from the strengthened focus on self-reflection by raising (and discussing) questions like: What is my typical behavior? What is my cultural imprint? How German am I (compared to Schroll-Machl's Cultural standards)? How can I reflect my impact on others (in offline settings as well as in relation to digital communication)? How do I use the advantages of my cultural imprint? etc.

Also demonstrating the effect of selective perception depending on what someone is expecting (or not) had considerable impact on the participants and increased their curiosity towards foreign cultures (e.g., using the commercial "Whodunnit" by Major of London and Transportation of London, 2008.)

The discussion of critical incidents with a focus on high and low-context communication seems to prepare students to reflect their everyday communication on a meta level (e.g., "I know I communicate in quite a direct way. I am happy to receive any tips when I do not get things right. Could we agree on a sign when this happens?").

*What We Learned:* From a (certainly also typical German) perspective, high-context communication does not work well in a digital context, because so much context is eliminated. "Low-context-communication" seems to work much better in digital (intercultural) communication.

The stereotype of Germans as people who communicate very directly is encountered by the Foreign Office staff in their role as "representatives of Germany" very often. The active reflection of one's own imprint in relation to this stereotype makes it possible to use positive effects of this stereotypical perception, and allows countering negative ones appropriately and consciously. In particular, regarding digital communication, this represents a skill that we want to specifically promote through the training sessions presented.

## Hypotheses for Future Research

After analyzing the experience of using very brief and direct communication during the online trainings, this paper suggests some hypotheses for future research:

1. Cross-cultural online communication requires more 'low-context' communication than face to face communication.
2. Online communication eliminates context that is required for "low-context" communication styles.
3. Online intercultural trainings need new methods to teach low context communication, like virtual reality, for example.



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