



Intercultural Challenges in the Global Classroom in the Times of Geopolitical Conflicts; One Size Fits Them All?

Julia Huisman

NHLStenden University of Applied Science, The Netherlands

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, virtual and physical global classrooms have brought together students from diverse cultural backgrounds. While this multicultural environment enhances enriching educational experiences, it also presents a variety of intercultural challenges. These challenges include language barriers, different communication styles, varying expectations about education, and conflicts from cultural misunderstandings. Many institutions behold the principle that one system still serves the learning journey of all participating students; One size fits them all. However, the diverse learning habits and values from different educational systems can complicate collaboration and engagement and very much so nowadays regarding the political conflicts throughout the globe. Educators and students alike must navigate challenges related to stereotypes, biases, prejudices, norms and values of diverse ethnicities, that may manifest in the classroom.

This article explores global classrooms and intercultural conflicts in the time of migration due to geopolitical conflicts, examining the factors that contribute to these conflicts, including cultural biases, language barriers, and differing educational practices. It highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity, effective communication, and the development of intercultural competence to mitigate potential conflicts and create a more inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the role of technology is discussed, alongside strategies for fostering intercultural dialogue and promoting mutual respect. Ultimately, this article highlights the need for educators and institutions to adopt a more holistic approach to tackling intercultural challenges, ensuring that global classrooms become spaces for positive and meaningful cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Global Classroom, Migration, Geopolitical Conflicts

1. Introduction

The global classroom is a replica of our interconnected world, bringing together students from various cultural backgrounds, belief systems, and geopolitical contexts. While diversity enriches learning experiences, it also presents unique challenges, especially when tensions between nations or regions influence interpersonal dynamics within educational contexts. Geopolitical conflicts often appear into classrooms, manifesting in the form of ideological divisions, emotional distress, and communication barriers. Educators and institutions must acknowledge these challenges and develop strategies to create an environment where learning is enhanced despite external political pressures. Successfully navigating intercultural interactions requires fostering respect, empathy, and open dialogue among students, ensuring that differences enhance, rather than hinder, the educational journey.

The notion of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to intercultural education becomes increasingly problematic in times of geopolitical conflict. Standardised curricula and universal pedagogical models often fail to account for the emotional and psychological impact that global crises has on students from affected regions. When students carry the weight of war, displacement, or political unrest into the classroom, their ability to engage, collaborate, and learn is deeply impacted. A rigid educational framework that overlooks these lived realities risks alienating students and exacerbating intercultural divides. Instead, educators must adopt flexible, context-sensitive strategies that recognise the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students, particularly during periods of global instability.

What is more, the global classroom must be seen not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as a space for intercultural healing. In times of geopolitical tension, students may find themselves navigating conflicting narratives, loyalties, and identities. This dynamic can lead to discomfort, silence, or even confrontation if not carefully tackled. As Chen, G. M. And Starosta, W.J. (2000) [2] and others have argued, effective intercultural communication requires more than just awareness—it demands active engagement, empathy, and the willingness to confront difficult conversations. By fostering a classroom culture that values dialogue over “it has always been like that” and understanding over

uniformity, educators should transform intercultural challenges into opportunities for growth, resilience, and mutual respect.

2. Understanding Intercultural Competences in Educational Contexts

2.1 Defining Intercultural Communication in the Classroom

Intercultural communication in education refers to the exchange of information and meaning across cultural boundaries within learning environments. It encompasses verbal and non-verbal interactions shaped by cultural norms, values, and worldviews. Theories based on interculturalists such as Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede [5,6] have highlighted how cultural dimensions such as; context orientation, power distance, and individualism versus collectivism, affect communication styles and expectations. For example, students from high-context cultures may rely on indirect cues and shared understanding, while those from low-context cultures may expect explicit and structured communication. These differences can lead to misinterpretations or discomfort if not addressed by culturally responsive pedagogy. Recognising and adapting to these variations is essential for fostering inclusive and effective learning environments.

2.2 The Role of Cultural Identity and Perception

Cultural identity plays a central role in shaping how students perceive themselves and others in the classroom. It influences participation, engagement, and the interpretation of academic content. When students encounter peers with differing cultural assumptions, tensions may arise, especially in politically charged contexts. Educators must be aware of how cultural perceptions and stereotypes can influence classroom dynamics, often unconsciously. As Dervin, F. (2016) [8] argues, interculturality should not be reduced to static categories or national traits, but understood as a dynamic, negotiated process that reflects the fluidity of identity and the complexity of human interaction. Encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural lenses and to approach others with curiosity rather than judgment is key to building mutual respect and understanding.

2.3 Intercultural Competence as a Pedagogical Educational Methodology

Intercultural competence is increasingly recognized as a core skill in global education. Darla Deardorff's (2006) [1] pyramid model of intercultural competence outlines a progression from attitudes (respect, openness) to knowledge (cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic understanding) and skills (listening, observing, evaluating), culminating in internal outcomes like adaptability and external outcomes such as effective and appropriate communication.

In times of geopolitical conflict, these competencies become even more critical. Students may bring emotionally charged perspectives into the classroom, shaped by national narratives or personal experiences of conflict. Educators who are interculturally competent can help mediate these tensions, creating a space where diverse voices are heard and valued. This requires intentional pedagogical strategies, including reflective dialogue, collaborative learning, and culturally responsive assessment.

3. Pedagogical Strategies for Intercultural Education

3.1 Culturally Responsive Teaching and Reflective Pedagogies

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a foundational strategy that acknowledges the cultural backgrounds of students as assets in the learning process. According to Geneva, G. (2010) [13], CRT involves using students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to make learning more appropriate and effective. In practice, this means incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, using inclusive language, and adapting teaching methods to accommodate different learning preferences. For example, group work may be structured to reflect collectivist values, while individual assignments may cater to students from more individualistic cultures. CRT also involves recognizing and addressing implicit biases, ensuring that all students feel seen, respected, and valued. Encouraging open dialogue and critical reflection is essential in navigating intercultural tensions. Dialogic pedagogy, inspired by thinkers in the line of Freire, P. (1970) [14] emphasises mutual learning through conversation and the co-construction of knowledge. In intercultural classrooms, this approach allows students to share their experiences, question assumptions, and engage with multiple

viewpoints. Reflective practices such as; journaling, guided discussions, or intercultural autobiography assignments, help students process their own cultural identities and biases. These strategies are particularly powerful during times of geopolitical conflict, as they provide a structured space for students to explore complex emotions and perspectives in a respectful and supportive environment.

3.2 Inclusive Curriculum Design and Collaborative and Experiential Learning

An inclusive curriculum goes beyond a mere representation to critically engage with global issues and diverse voices. This involves integrating content from non-Western perspectives, highlighting contributions from marginalised communities, and addressing topics like colonialism, migration, and global inequality. In the context of geopolitical conflict, educators can use case studies, literature, and media from affected regions to foster empathy and understanding. Importantly, the curriculum should be adaptable, allowing educators to respond to current events and the specific cultural compound of their classrooms. This flexibility ensures that learning remains relevant and responsive to students' lived realities.

Collaborative learning strategies such as peer teaching, intercultural group projects, and problem-based learning, encourage students to work across cultural boundaries. These methods promote mutual respect, active listening, and shared responsibility. Experiential learning, including simulations, role-plays, and service-learning projects, allows students to engage with real-world intercultural challenges in a hands-on way. These experiences not only deepen understanding but also build practical skills in communication, negotiation, and empathy—key components of intercultural competence.

3.3 Slow Education Movement

In the context of intercultural education, the concept of slow education offers a compelling counterpoint to the fast-paced, performance-driven models that dominate global academia. Huisman, J. (2024) [7] argues that slow education emphasises depth over speed, reflection over output, and relationships over results. This pedagogical philosophy aligns closely with the goals of intercultural education, which require time, patience, and emotional investment to foster genuine understanding across cultural divides. In times of geopolitical conflict, where students may be suffering from trauma, identity struggles, or polarised narratives, slow education provides the space for healing and critical engagement. It encourages educators to prioritise meaningful dialogue, sustained inquiry, and the co-construction of knowledge; principles that are essential for cultivating intercultural competence and solidarity in the global classroom.

4. Institutional Responsibilities in Intercultural Education

Institutions play a critical role in setting the tone for intercultural engagement through their policies and strategic frameworks. Universities must move beyond symbolic diversity statements and implement actionable policies that promote equity, inclusion, and intercultural understanding. This includes developing comprehensive internationalization strategies, establishing diversity and inclusion offices, and embedding intercultural goals into institutional missions. Policies should also address the specific needs of students affected by geopolitical crises—such as offering mental health support, academic accommodations, and safe spaces for dialogue. By institutionalising these commitments, universities can ensure that intercultural education is not left to the discretion of individual faculty members but becomes a shared responsibility across departments and leadership levels.

Faculty are on the front lines of intercultural education, yet many lack formal training in navigating cultural differences or addressing politically sensitive topics. Institutions must invest in ongoing professional development that equips educators with the tools to teach inclusively and respond to intercultural challenges. This includes workshops on culturally responsive pedagogy, conflict-sensitive teaching, and managing difficult conversations in the classroom. Additionally, institutions should incentivise curriculum innovation by supporting interdisciplinary courses, global learning modules, and collaborative teaching across cultural contexts. Providing resources, recognition, and institutional backing for these efforts shows a genuine commitment to intercultural learning and empowers educators to lead transformative change.

5. Recommendations



Higher education institutions should embed intercultural competence training into both faculty development and student orientation programs. This training should go beyond surface-level cultural awareness and focus on practical skills such as conflict resolution, empathetic listening, and navigating cultural ambiguity. Institutions can partner with intercultural communication experts to design workshops and modules that are context-sensitive and adaptable to current geopolitical realities. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to ensure these programs remain effective and responsive to evolving classroom dynamics.

Incorporating the principles of slow education, as advocated by Huisman (2024) [7], can significantly enhance intercultural learning. Institutions should encourage pedagogical models that prioritise depth over speed, allowing students time to reflect, engage in meaningful dialogue, and process complex intercultural experiences. This could involve redesigning course structures to include more discussion-based sessions, reflective assignments, and interdisciplinary projects that connect global issues with personal narratives. Slow education also supports student well-being, particularly for those affected by geopolitical conflict, by creating a more humane and inclusive academic environment.

Curricula should be continuously reviewed and adapted to reflect the cultural diversity of the student body and the global context in which education takes place. This includes integrating non-Western perspectives, addressing global power dynamics, and including case studies from conflict-affected regions. Institutions should support faculty in developing such content through grants, collaborative networks, and access to diverse academic resources. Moreover, student voices should be included in curriculum design processes to ensure that educational content resonates with their lived experiences and aspirations.

Institutions can create mentorship programs that pair students from different cultural backgrounds to foster peer-to-peer learning and support. These programs can be structured around shared academic goals, language exchange, or cultural dialogue. For example, the University of British Columbia's "Global Peer Program" connects international and domestic students to ease cultural transitions and build intercultural friendships. Such initiatives not only support student integration but also promote empathy and mutual understanding in informal learning spaces.

Digital platforms can be powerful tools for intercultural engagement, especially in hybrid or international classrooms. Institutions can implement virtual exchange programs, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), where students from different countries work together on shared projects. These experiences expose students to diverse perspectives and foster global collaboration skills. Additionally, moderated online forums and intercultural discussion boards can provide safe spaces for students to express views and engage in respectful dialogue on sensitive topics.

In times of geopolitical conflict, institutions must be prepared to respond swiftly and compassionately to the needs of affected students. This includes offering trauma-informed counselling services, academic flexibility (e.g., deadline extensions or alternative assessments), and clear communication about available support. For instance, during the Ukraine crisis, several European universities established emergency funds, housing assistance, and legal aid for displaced students. Proactive crisis response not only supports student well-being but also reinforces the institution's commitment to equity and inclusion.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The global classroom is a dynamic and often unpredictable space, especially in times of geopolitical conflict. As this paper has shown, intercultural challenges are not merely about language barriers or cultural misunderstandings, they are deeply rooted in identity, power, and emotion. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from standardised, "one-size-fits-all" approaches to more nuanced, flexible, and empathetic educational practices. Theories by Hofstede and Hall provide foundational insights, but real transformation occurs when these theories are applied through context-aware pedagogy and institutionalised.

Educators are central to shaping intercultural experiences, but they cannot do it alone. Institutions must provide the structural support, training, and resources necessary to foster inclusive and resilient learning environments. As demonstrated by successful programs in Japan, Indonesia, and New Zealand, institutional alignment with intercultural goals leads to more sustainable and impactful outcomes. Faculty development, inclusive policies, and curriculum innovation are not optional—they are essential components of a globally relevant education system.

Intercultural education in the times of geopolitical conflict demands more than awareness—it requires action, reflection, and systemic change. By embracing slow education, fostering intercultural

competence, and reshaping curricula, educators and institutions can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and solidarity. The global classroom, when thoughtfully supported, becomes not just a site of learning, but a space for healing, dialogue, and the co-creation of a more just and interconnected world.

In these times marked by global crises and cultural fragmentation, the global classroom stands as both a reflection of and a response to our interconnected world. The notion that a single pedagogical model can serve all learners, regardless of their cultural, emotional, or geopolitical realities, is not only outdated but potentially harmful. As this paper has stated, intercultural education must be dynamic, empathetic, and context-sensitive. It must embrace complexity, foster critical reflection, and prioritise human connection over uniformity. By rejecting the “one-size-fits-all” approach and embracing diversity as a strength, educators and institutions can transform the classroom into a space of resilience, dialogue, and hope; where learning becomes a shared journey toward mutual understanding and global solidarity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Deardorff, D. K. (2006). The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. 10, pp 241-266
- [2] Chen, G. M and Starosta, W.J. (2000). The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale . *Human Communication*, , pp1-15.
- [3] Lee, H. (2024). *Intercultural understanding: Implications for multicultural education*. *Multicultural Education Review*, 16(2), 89–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2024.2376305>
- [4] Brandt, W. C. (2024). *A review of the literature on intercultural understanding*. National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. <https://www.nciea.org>
- [5] Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural differences in teaching and learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(3), 301–320.
- [6] Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books. London.
- [7] Huisman, J. (2024) Slow Movement to Enhance the Development of Empathy in Education . The Future of Education Conference Proceedings, Florence 2024.
- [8] Devin, F. (2016). *Interculturality in Education: A Theoretical and Methodological Toolbox*. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016.
- [9] International Baccalaureate Organization (2024). *Competencies of the Future: Intercultural Understanding*. <https://www.ibo.org/globalassets/new-structure/research/pdfs/2024-intercultural-understanding-report-eng.pdf>
- [10] Pedersen, P. J. (2016). Toward intercultural development and a model for institutional change. In D. Gross, K. Abrams, & C. Z. Enns (Eds.), *Internationalizing the undergraduate psychology curriculum: Practical lessons learned at home and abroad* (pp. 239–257). American Psychological Association.
- [11] Matsumoto, D. (Ed.). (2010). *APA handbook of intercultural communication*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4317223>
- [12] ERIC. (2024). *Digital intercultural education: A comparative study of self-access resources*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1392587>
- [13] Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press. ISBN: 9780807750780.
- [14] Freire, P. (1970/2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; 50th anniversary ed.). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429339530>