THE CULTURE DETECTIVES MODEL: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract: *This article explains the Culture Detectives Model for exploring cultural artifacts, designed for young people engaged in non-formal education within international projects funded by the INTERREG Romania-Bulgaria and Erasmus+ programs. The model aims to enhance the intercultural awareness of participants from different national backgrounds who come together in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Additionally, it seeks to foster deep cultural empathy and respect for human rights. The article explores the academic foundations of the model, including Hofstede's concepts and the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence, developed by Bebenova-Nikolova. It then discusses the pillars of the Culture Detectives Model and presents its structural stages in a Table. The Culture Detectives Model has been successfully tested in non-formal education settings with approximately 100 young participants in INTERREG Romania-Bulgaria and Erasmus+ projects, yielding positive results. The application of such an educational program confirms that intercultural experiences have the potential not only to help participants live and work more effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural contexts but also to lead to deep, transformative, and meaningful learning.*

Keywords: *Culture Detectives Model; intercultural competence; language competence;*

Introduction

The *Culture Detectives Model* is rooted in well-established theories of intercultural education, drawing primarily on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede 7-8), Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb 28), and the principles of deep learning. This innovative approach combines culture- and history-specific texts to enrich learners' understanding of core cultural values, while simultaneously fostering the development of English language skills. The textual content is provided in a Preparatory Reading Pack. This collection of reading materials is designed for each specific training and covers cultural information about the participants' countries.

Unlike traditional scenario-based models, the Culture Detectives Model emphasizes authentic intercultural experiences, where participants engage in real-life tasks tied to historical and cultural landmarks in the host city. To achieve this, they are provided with Handouts describing the exploration routes and sites in the city, they should visit and the tasks they need to solve.

Throughout the learning process, participants are encouraged to observe, analyze, and interpret cultural patterns through guided inquiry and collaborative Internet exploration. This dynamic approach not only enhances cultural awareness but also builds digital competence, as learners create multimedia digital stories to synthesize their field experiences. These digital narratives reflect their growth in intercultural sensitivity, linguistic expression, and critical thinking.

To date, the *Culture Detectives Model* has been successfully implemented with around 100 young learners aged 19-29 from different countries, who participated in a youth exchange hosted in one of the participating countries. The activities within the model span a day, during which learners work in mixed international teams. Communication is conducted in English, and each team benefits from the cultural expertise of the local participant to solve in-field tasks. Participants are also encouraged to apply internet research to answer puzzles and quizzes, further enhancing their entertaining learning experience.

Literature Review

The mobility of young people across borders through programmes such as INTERREG and Erasmus+ has been widely studied in the context of non-formal education, intercultural learning, and youth empowerment. However, existing literature suggests that when young participants engage in international youth exchanges, they are often not explicitly guided to explore the architectural and historical richness of their host environments. Immersed in the thematic objectives of the exchange or the social dynamics of the group, many youth may overlook meaningful interaction with local cultural heritage—both tangible (such as monuments, buildings, and public art) and intangible (including narratives, symbols, and spatial practices). In the absence of intentional educational frameworks or structured opportunities for heritage engagement, their intercultural experience may remain limited. Thus they will fail to use the potential for deeper cultural awareness and critical reflection. This review examines relevant theoretical and empirical contributions that address these challenges and highlight the role of place-based learning in enhancing the educational value of international youth mobility.

Cases of missed opportunities to enrich cultural understanding from architectural and historical sites are explored by Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 10) in her article "The history of architecture and art and how it is seen by tourists". The author explores the relationship between the historical and contemporary significance of architecture and art as primary motivators for tourism (Kaczmarek 10).

In the early stages of art-motivated travel, notably during the grand tour era of the 17th to 19th centuries, upper-class youth, primarily from Britain and later the American bourgeoisie, engaged in extensive travel as a form of cultural education and personal development. Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 10) claims that this practice was shaped by systematic preparation and the study of classical literature and art. Tourists of this period were essentially cultural pilgrims, seeking to verify their theoretical knowledge through direct engagement with artistic heritage.

In contrast, Kaczmarek notes that contemporary cultural tourism, especially since the mid-1980s, is largely driven by mass accessibility and globalization, with rapid transport and the proliferation of cheap air travel contributing significantly to increased mobility (Kaczmarek 10). The resulting tourist behavior has shifted toward shorter, checklist-style visits often influenced by travel guides and online rankings. According to Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 11), this model emphasizes superficial engagement with art, reducing complex cultural objects to photo opportunities. Futhermore, the author introduces a typology of tourists based on their level of knowledge of art history and the depth of their engagement with artworks. These include:

• Discoverers: Educated, reflective tourists who methodically prepare for art encounters.

• Learners: Mass tourists with a moderate level of knowledge, often acquired through guidebooks.

• Box-tickers: Tourists engaging in surface-level consumption of art, driven by social conformity and image-making.

• Connoisseurs: A selective group of experts who visit art sites with the intent of contemplative and highly personal engagement.

Statistical data presented by Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 12) highlights the dominance of urban destinations and cultural institutions—museums, historic buildings, and iconic landmarks—among the world's most visited tourist attractions. This suggests a continuing centrality of artistic and architectural heritage in tourism, albeit approached differently than in the past.

To conclude, when designing a field-based cultural exploration game, it is crucial to account for the diversity of young participants' profiles, particularly in terms of their prior knowledge of art history and their depth of engagement with cultural artifacts. As Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 12) outlines, such a group can be broadly categorized along a continuum—from those with expert-level understanding and a strong interest in the historical and artistic context of architectural heritage, to casual young visitors whose engagement is primarily aesthetic or recreational.

One possible approach to designing a course aimed at improving intercultural competence is proposed by Plăcintar in the article *"How to Design an Intercultural Awareness Training Course"*, which outlines key

principles and methodological considerations for structuring effective intercultural training. The latter outlines a practical, inductive framework for intercultural training, rooted in the methodologies developed during the Cultural Trainers Certificate Course organized at International House London and funded by the Grundtvig programme. The article not only introduces theoretical underpinnings but also offers applied strategies for trainers designing courses to build cultural competence among learners in international, multicultural environments.

Plăcintar describes cultural awareness as a transformative process involving the shift from an ethnocentric to an ethno-relative perspective (Plăcintar 70). This evolution enables individuals to recognize and adapt to cultural differences.

Plăcintar elaborates on a practical training framework grounded in three core stages: introduction to cultural concepts, cultural training elements, and adaptation strategies (Plăcintar 70).

In her article Plăcintar suggests trainings, which draw heavily from established cultural theories, notably (Plăcintar 71):

- Hall's high/low context and monochronic/polychronic distinctions,
- Hofstede's five cultural dimensions,
- Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's relational dimensions,
- Mole's systemic vs. organic organizational cultures,
- Lewis's LMR (linear-active, multi-active, reactive) typology

These models allow trainees to understand cultural variance systematically and apply theoretical concepts in intercultural interactions.

Plăcintar demonstrates the training framework's application through a student-based project titled "Cultural Portrayal of Romania" (Plăcintar 77). The exercise compares Romanian students' self-perceptions with Richard D. Lewis's profile of Romanian culture in When Cultures Collide (Lewis 324–329). The juxtaposition highlights common cultural traits such as emotional expressiveness, a complex relationship with authority, and pride in national identity. It also reveals generational changes, particularly a shift toward more Western managerial models among younger Romanians.

To conclude, the course's inductive methodology—structured around the learning cycle of Activity, Debriefing, Conclusions, and Implementation—prioritizes personal experience over abstract theory. As Plăcintar notes, effective intercultural training should always be outcome-driven: "there is no training without implementation" (Plăcintar 77).

When designing intercultural training in English for young ESL learners, one should carefully consider both their level of language competence and the integration of literary texts as tools for promoting cultural awareness and simultaneously improving language skills.Wąsikiewicz-Firlej (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 2) contributes to this discussion by demonstrating how

literature can foster cultural reflection and identity negotiation, particularly through the more inclusive concept of cultural awareness, as opposed to the more technical framework of intercultural competence. This allows for more flexible application in the early stages of intercultural education. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 9) explores how structured and reflective reading of culturally rich texts can support both affective engagement and cognitive development. Her quasi-experimental study, conducted with 29 Polish university students, uses Karin Muller's Japanland to explore gender roles in Japanese culture. Through a combination of pre/post questionnaires, guided discussions, and expert commentary, the study documents increased learner motivation, greater sensitivity to intra-cultural diversity, and a more nuanced understanding of foreign perspectives.

Notably, the involvement of cultural insiders (Japanese experts) served to correct stereotypes and enrich interpretation, proving essential to the learners' development (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 9). The findings suggest that literary texts, when supported by expert guidance and critical dialogue, can serve as powerful platforms for reflection, cultural comparison, and empathy-building.

The *Culture Detectives Model* draws on this experience by involving experts from the visited country at all stages of the process—ensuring authenticity, cultural depth, and a more nuanced understanding of the local context.

A current strong trend in intercultural learning is gamification in education. The latter has emerged as a dynamic field focusing on the integration of game elements and game-based learning strategies within educational environments. A growing body of literature attests to the pedagogical value of games, particularly their ability to support critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving, as well as to facilitate experiential learning (Chen 5).

The study by Guanzheng Chen, "Integrating Digital Cultural Detective Games with Social Emotional Learning to Foster Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Empathy among Bilingual Kindergarten Teachers", explores precisely this intersection. It demonstrates how the fusion of intercultural education, gamification principles, and digital environments can enhance the development of cultural sensitivity and intercultural empathy, particularly when combined with social-emotional learning approaches in teacher training contexts.

Another approach to intercultural training is the scenario-based approach which uses carefully constructed narratives or real-life inspired situations that require participants to interpret and respond to culturally significant dilemmas or misunderstandings. These scenarios serve as experiential learning tools, offering a psychologically safe yet intellectually

challenging environment in which learners explore the influence of cultural variables on communication styles, social expectations, and decision-making processes (Kolb 28).

Scenarios may take various forms, such as: written case studies, role-plays or live simulations, short films or interactive digital modules, or collaborative, story-based group tasks.

This method is particularly effective in the development of intercultural competence, as it supports two core capacities emphasized in leading models: cultural perspective-shifting and self-reflexivity. These are foundational in Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff 254-255), Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett 3-4), and definitely in Bebenova-Nikolova's Integrated Process Model on Intercultural Competence (Bebenova-Nikolova 57).

Cultural Detective® Methodology

The Cultural Detective® methodology, developed by Curdy, Robinson, and Saphiere, represents another tool. It is not a digital game, but a narrative-based, experiential learning model that draws upon scenario-based cultural critical incidents to build intercultural competence. Grounded in values-based reflection and collaborative meaning-making, Cultural Detective® is designed for both facilitated and virtual learning environments. It provides learners with a structured, step-by-step process for interpreting intercultural misunderstandings and constructing culturally appropriate responses. According to Saphiere (Curdy, Robinson, Saphiere 5), the novelty of the approach lies in replacing simplistic cultural generalizations (e.g. "do's and don'ts") with a values lens that helps learners uncover the motivational underpinnings of culturally influenced behavior.

Each culture-specific Cultural Detective® package consists of three interrelated elements:

- A Facilitator Guide with the core methodology and practical instructions.
- Participant Materials, including values lenses, scenario-based critical incidents, and reflective worksheets.
- A culture-specific Values Lens, derived from insider research and contextualized examples.

The Swiss Values Lens, for instance, highlights culturally embedded orientations such as precision, reliability, and adherence to procedure, which are paired with potential misperceptions (e.g., "inefficient" or "arrogant") by outsiders. This dual perspective fosters cognitive flexibility and meta-awareness (Curdy, Robinson, Saphiere 5). This Cultural Detective® model has wide applicability in corporate training contexts. As the training materials

emphasize, intercultural competence is not solely the responsibility of individual employees but must be cultivated across organizational structures. This makes the tool especially powerful in international teams, merger integration, expatriation, and multicultural education.

Design Methodology of the Culture Detectives Model
　　The following section presents the conceptual framework of the Culture Detectives Model, with particular attention to how four distinct academic concepts serve as its foundational pillars. It further elaborates on the ways in which these theoretical concepts build the model's design and application. The structural stages of the model are outlined in the accompanying table.

Pillar 1: Hofstede's Concept of Culture and Its Dimensions
　　Hofstede's conceptualization of culture serves as a foundational theoretical pillar in the *Culture Detectives Model*, particularly when aiming to develop the intercultural competence of young participants engaged in international educational programs. Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group from another" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 6). This definition highlights that culture comprises enduring mental patterns—of thinking, feeling, and acting—that are shared by members of a group and internalized over time through a long and complex process of socialization.
　　The use of the term programming is particularly significant. It implies that culture is not innate but is gradually acquired through lifelong exposure to social norms, institutions, and communicative practices. This understanding aligns with Bennett's view that culture encompasses several interrelated domains: values, rituals, heroes and symbols.
　　These elements, as Bennett emphasizes, are transmitted through a variety of socializing agents such as family, peers, educational institutions, religious traditions, media, and workplace cultures. Importantly, the process of cultural acquisition is largely unconscious, making it difficult for individuals to critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions without deliberate intercultural training or exposure.
　　Central to Hofstede's model (Hofstede 7-8) are the cultural dimensions, which offer a comparative framework for analyzing how societies differ in their normative orientations. The four original dimensions—later expanded to six—provide a structured lens for identifying potential cultural contrasts that can influence interpersonal and institutional communication across cultures.
　　These dimensions are especially useful within the *Culture Detectives Model*, which frames learners as investigators of cultural codes. By analyzing situations, behaviors, or communication patterns through Hofstede's lens,

learners can begin to "decode" cultural differences not as personal oddities or failures but as outcomes of deeper, systemic values and orientations.

In the *Culture Detective Model*, Hofstede's theoretical framework (Hofstede 7-8) is not merely referenced as background knowledge; it is actively translated into practice through a targeted pedagogical tool—the Preparatory Reading Pack. This guide serves as a cultural compass, equipping young participants with the cognitive and affective tools needed to engage meaningfully with the host culture and their peers from different cultural backgrounds during international educational activities. While Hofstede's cultural dimensions are not always explicitly named in the pack, they are implicitly embedded in the comparative cultural content. It is distributed digitally to all participants prior to international trainings. Its role is to provide a shared foundation for intercultural exploration, offering a mixture of accessible cultural descriptions, critical reflection points, and practical guidance rooted in intercultural theory.

As part of the *Culture Detectives Model*, this guide performs several interrelated functions:

1. Knowledge Activation

By presenting key facts about the country, the Pack gives participants the cognitive context necessary for interpreting visual and experiential stimuli during site visits (e.g., understanding the historical layering in Vilnius' architectural styles).

2. Awareness-Raising

Through cross-cultural comparison, participants are prompted to reflect on their own cultural assumptions.

3. Perspective-Taking

The guide encourages participants to explore cultural values not as "correct" or "incorrect," but as context-dependent orientations. The section on *cross-cultural considerations* emphasizes that individual experiences differ, and generalizations should be approached critically—an echo of Hofstede's own warning against the ecological fallacy (Hofstede 9).

4. Application in the Field

The content culminates in sections such as "What We Will Explore in Vilnius" and "Basics of Architectural Styles", which provide both cultural and historical context. These serve as real-world arenas where participants can apply their "cultural decoding" skills—analyzing how national history, values, and ideologies are reflected in built environments, artistic expressions, and public rituals.

The practice of designing and distributing the *Preparatory Reading Pack* is conceptually aligned with Wąsikiewicz-Firlej's proposal that structured textual engagement—whether through literary narratives or

informational texts—can serve as a powerful medium for developing cultural awareness (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 16).

Pillar 2: Experiential Learning by Kolb

David A. Kolb's model of Experiential Learning, presented in *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), provides the backbone of the *Culture Detective Model* used in this article. Kolb's four-stage learning cycle—Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation—offers a powerful structure for cultivating intercultural competence by emphasizing learning through lived experience (Kolb 28).

In contrast to scenario-based models, which rely on simulated dilemmas, the *Culture Detectives Model* grounds learning in authentic social contexts—local heritage sites, spontaneous conversations, public rituals, and lived urban environments—making it not only pedagogically grounded but socially embedded.

A. Concrete Experience

In this stage, participants are immersed in cultural encounters. They receive an itinerary and task list on Handouts directing them to specific historical and social sites, where they must gather impressions, observe behaviors, and "solve" culturally coded mysteries—such as uncovering symbolic meanings in architecture or understanding differing social norms.

This stage corresponds to the first-hand encounter with cultural products, echoing Kaczmarek's (Kaczmarek 10) recognition that the way tourists perceive architectural and artistic heritage is shaped not only by knowledge but also by aesthetic filters and emotional engagement. Like tourists, learners in the *Culture Detectives Model* bring varying levels of cultural literacy. Unlike tourists, however, they are equipped with an interpretive mission and supported by a structured educational design that guides them beyond passive observation.

It is important to note that although the *Culture Detectives Model* shares conceptual ancestry with the Cultural Detective® series developed by Dianne Hofner Saphiere, the two diverge in their method of application. Saphiere's Cultural Detective® is a scenario-based tool that invites classroom learners to analyze fictional intercultural situations using the "Values Lens" and a set of culture-specific packages. While this framework is valuable in organizational and training settings, it primarily operates within constructed, hypothetical cases.

In contrast, the *Culture Detectives Model* adapts the metaphor of the detective to real-time, real-world experiences, where the cultural clues are not scripted but discovered through observation, interaction, and inquiry. The

metaphor becomes a field method, guiding participants as they engage directly with cultural environments and navigate meaning in context.

B. Reflective Observation

Following each encounter, participants engage in team-based reflection on their observations and emotional responses. They are encouraged to examine their assumptions, biases, and interpretations. Structured reflection questions facilitate cognitive distancing—enabling participants to begin analyzing rather than reacting.

This practice is crucial in intercultural learning, as Kaczmarek (Kaczmarek 10) warns against superficial or romanticized readings of cultural symbols. She emphasizes that tourism often aestheticizes the past, presenting sanitized or idealized cultural narratives. By fostering guided reflection, the Culture Detective Model disrupts this tendency and helps participants identify both the visible and invisible layers of culture, aligning with Kolb's principle that learning must involve processing experience, not merely acquiring it (Kolb 38).

C. Abstract Conceptualization

Participants then work to make sense of their observations using cultural theory, especially Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede 7-8), which provide comparative structures for understanding cultural variability. Working in groups, they articulate their insights through digital storytelling, presentations, or visual mapping, linking individual experiences to abstract principles.

This process parallels Saphiere's "Values Lens" in the Cultural Detective® framework, where cultural incidents are understood through deeper values. However, in the *Culture Detectives Model* described here, those values are not pre-identified. Participants must detect, interpret, and validate them within authentic cultural settings, often in real-time and across multiple dimensions of cultural contact.

This phase is also where Wąsikiewicz-Firlej's observations about literature as a medium for cultural reflection come into play: just as students in her study moved from emotional to analytical understanding of cultural perspectives (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 11), learners in the Culture Detective Model are supported in building transferable conceptual tools based on their personal discoveries.

D. Active Experimentation

In the final phase, learners are encouraged to apply their new intercultural knowledge in evolving contexts, including informal conversations, collaborative tasks, and subsequent cross-cultural encounters during the training. This phase is crucial for reinforcing behavioral adaptation

and communicative flexibility, which are essential components of intercultural competence.

Pillar 3. Deep Learning in the Culture Detectives Model
Deep learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the active construction of knowledge through meaningful engagement with complex ideas, rather than the passive reception or rote memorization of information. It involves a cognitive and emotional commitment to understanding not only what is being learned but also why it matters in broader social, cultural, and ethical contexts. As opposed to surface learning—which focuses on short-term recall and test performance—deep learning cultivates critical thinking, reflective judgment, and conceptual transfer.

In the *Culture Detectives Model*, deep learning is deliberately embedded through the design of tasks and learning sequences that require participants to engage critically with cultural realities, not merely observe or reproduce information about them. The model encourages learners to become cultural investigators, probing beneath surface behaviors to uncover the values, assumptions, and power structures that shape human interaction in intercultural contexts.

The *Culture Detectives Model* integrates deep learning by fostering critical questioning at every stage of the experiential cycle. Participants are not simply asked to identify cultural facts or observe differences in behavior; rather, they are prompted to ask questions such as:

- What values or belief systems might underlie this behavior?
- How is this cultural practice shaped by historical, political, or economic conditions?
- What alternative perspectives exist within the same cultural group?
- How does my own cultural background influence my interpretation of this event?

Such questions lead to cognitive dissonance. By confronting ambiguity, contradiction, or unfamiliarity, learners are compelled to move beyond simplistic dichotomies (e.g., "right vs. wrong" or "normal vs. strange") and develop intercultural interpretive competence—the ability to understand and navigate difference with nuance and empathy.

Linking Historical Thinking and Global Understanding - Deep learning in this model is also connected to historical consciousness. Participants are often asked to explore connections between past and present, and to consider how cultural narratives, identities, and conflicts are constructed over time. For instance, while visiting architectural sites, learners are encouraged to reflect not only on stylistic differences but also on the historical layering of meanings—how periods of occupation, resistance,

migration, or reform have influenced the built environment and the people who inhabit it.

Deep Learning through Cultural Storytelling - A key methodological feature of the *Culture Detectives Model* is the creation of digital stories or reflective cultural narratives at the end of the training sequence. These stories are not just products—they are expressions of deep learning, as they require participants to synthesize their experiences, reflect critically on their assumptions, and present their insights through multimodal and emotionally resonant formats. This pedagogical choice mirrors Wąsikiewicz-Firlej's use of narrative engagement in fostering cultural awareness: both models highlight the transformative potential of storytelling as a space where learners integrate the personal and the theoretical, the experiential and the abstract (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej 16).

Pillar 4: The Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence in the Culture Detective Model

The Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence, developed by Diana Bebenova-Nikolova, offers a dynamic and holistic perspective on how individuals develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective intercultural communication (Bebenova-Nikolova 57). Her model highlights intercultural competence not as a static outcome, but as a complex, recursive process that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. It encompasses exposure to diverse cultures, development of communicative skills, and sustained opportunities for reflection and transformation.

This model is embedded within the *Culture Detectives Model*, where it supports the design and sequencing of educational interventions during international training events. Through experiential, reflective, and collaborative tasks, the model operationalizes Bebenova-Nikolova's framework and translates its theoretical elements into practical learning experiences for youth participants.

A. Multicultural Educational Environment

At the core of the Integrated Process Model on Intercultural Competence is the premise that intercultural competence can only be developed in contexts where learners are exposed to multiple, authentic cultural perspectives (Bebenova-Nikolova 55). Similarly, the *Culture Detectives Model* is specifically designed for multicultural, international training environments, where participants from various cultural backgrounds live, work, and learn together. These settings become intercultural laboratories, allowing participants to observe, engage with, and critically analyze real-time cultural differences and commonalities.

In practice, participants interact not only with local communities (e.g., during site visits or fieldwork), but also with peers from partner countries. These interactions serve as rich intercultural input that challenge participants to manage ambiguity, build intercultural relationships, and reflect on cultural identity in a socially meaningful context. This aligns with Bebenova-Nikolova's emphasis on the situated and dialogical nature of intercultural competence development, which requires active participation in diverse cultural settings (Bebenova-Nikolova 57).

B. Development of Linguistic Competence as Part of Intercultural Competence

Another key element of the Integrated Process Model is the inseparability of language and culture in the development of intercultural competence (Bebenova-Nikolova 56). Language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of cultural values, social norms, and worldviews. Bebenova-Nikolova stresses that intercultural competence is built through linguistic interaction, where participants must negotiate meaning, adjust their communication styles, and develop sociolinguistic sensitivity.

In the *Culture Detectives Model*, linguistic activities are intentionally woven into intercultural tasks. These include interviews with locals, collaborative discussions with international peers, written reflections, and the creation of multilingual digital stories. Such tasks do not merely aim to improve vocabulary or grammar, but to foster pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately across cultural contexts. Participants thus develop linguistic awareness alongside intercultural sensitivity, fulfilling the model's emphasis on integrated competence.

Furthermore in many Erasmus+ training settings where English is used as a lingua franca, learners are exposed to varieties of global English and must practice linguistic adaptation and decoding—skills that are essential for communication in multicultural contexts.

C. Competence Development as a Continuous Cycle

Central to Bebenova-Nikolova's Integrated Process Model is the understanding that intercultural competence is not acquired once and for all. Rather, it is a lifelong learning process that requires constant refinement, re-evaluation, and reapplication of intercultural skills in new contexts. This dynamic, cyclical character of development is fully mirrored in the *Culture Detectives Model*, which is structured as a repetitive learning sequence based on Kolb's experiential cycle.

Each iteration of the learning cycle (experience–reflection–analysis–application) allows learners to **build on prior knowledge, test new**

strategies, and refine their cultural interpretations. Participants are encouraged to revisit their assumptions, reflect on communication breakdowns, and seek feedback from peers. Moreover, because activities are sequenced across several days and embedded within both formal and informal contexts (e.g., social evenings, collaborative tasks, public presentations), participants experience **multiple opportunities for real-time experimentation and learning transfer.**

The model's emphasis on **reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action** aligns directly with Bebenova-Nikolova's proposition that intercultural competence grows not just through exposure, but through **conscious engagement, iterative feedback, and meta-cognitive self-awareness** (Bebenova-Nikolova 56)

The structure of the Model is presented in tabular form (Table 1). The key elements in the cultural learning process within the model go through the described stages.

Stage	Activity	Objective	Implementation
Resource Development	Drafting Preparatory Reading Pack & Worksheets	Introduce Hofstede's cultural dimensions and intercultural values.	Developed by international project teams and shared digitally.
Pre-Training Preparation	Orientation training in participants' home country.	Build theoretical understanding of cultural diversity.	Conducted in national groups.
On-Site Preparation	Initial intercultural exposure.	Introduce tasks from Worksheets.	Participants divided into international mixed teams.
In-filed Application	Field visits to cultural sites.	Experience real-life cultural encounters	Conducted in another country.
Research	Online research & expert interviews.	Deepen understanding of cultural identity.	Participants collaborate in teams.
Digital Storytelling	Presentation of cultural findings.	Demonstrate intercultural competence growth.	Presented through multimedia formats.
Assessment & Reflection	Post-experience evaluation.	Ensure adaptive cultural learning.	Participants share feedback through online discussion forums.

Table 1- The structure of the *Cultural Detectives Model,*
developed by Bebenova-Nikolova

In summary, Bebenova-Nikolova's Integrated Process Model on Intercultural Competence is applied in the *Cultural Detectives Model* through the creation of a multicultural environment, the development of language skills, the continuous improvement of competence, and the combination of individual and group learning.

The implementation of the *Culture Detectives Model* follows a structured sequence of stages that blend theory with practice to develop intercultural competence. The process begins with **Resource Development,** during which international project teams collaborate to create **the Preparatory Reading Pack and Worksheets. Th**ese resources, distributed digitally, serve to introduce Hofstede's cultural dimensions and key intercultural values (Hofstede 7-8). This is followed by a **Pre-Training Preparation phase**, where participants receive **orientation training in their home countries.** Conducted in national groups, this stage aims to build a foundational theoretical understanding of cultural diversity.

Next, the **On-Site Preparation** stage marks the beginning of participants' **intercultural exposure**. Here, they are introduced to the practical tasks from the Cultural Worksheets and are organized into **internationally mixed teams** to promote cross-cultural collaboration. This is followed by the **In-field Application** phase, in which participants engage in **field visits to cultural and historical sites** in another country. These visits allow them to confront and navigate real-world cultural challenges.

To support deeper inquiry, the **Additional Research** stage encourages participants to conduct **online investigations and interviews with experts,** further enriching their understanding of cultural identity. The insights gained throughout the process are then synthesized during the **Digital Storytelling Stage**, where participants collaboratively create **multimedia presentations** that reflect their learning and growth in intercultural competence.

The final stage, **Assessment and Reflection**, involves **post-experience evaluation,** during which participants engage in **online discussion forums** to share feedback, reflect on their learning, and ensure the internalization of adaptive cultural skills. This cyclical and integrated approach supports sustained intercultural learning through experience, analysis, and critical reflection.

Conclusion

The Culture Detectives Model, developed as a non-formal educational tool, has been successfully implemented in various international youth exchanges involving over 100 participants from Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, and Spain. Its primary aim—to promote intercultural

competence through experiential learning—has consistently shown potential to foster cultural empathy, respect for diversity, and awareness of human rights.However, while the application of the model has demonstrated encouraging outcomes, a more nuanced synthesis reveals both its strengths and the areas in which further development is needed.

One of the model's most notable contributions lies in its integration of theoretical frameworks—namely Hofstede's dimensions of culture, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), and the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence. These four pillars provide the pedagogical backbone of the Culture Detectives Model and enable a structured yet flexible framework for youth engagement. It promotes respect for human rights, cultural empathy, and informed intercultural interactions, which makes it an effective instrument in non-formal education. The Model has been successfully applied in four international exchange projects, training over 100 young people from Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, and Spain. However, since these applications have occurred over several years, no formal evaluation of the model's effectiveness has been thoroughly conducted. Future studies should apply mixed-methods research designs to assess participants' learning outcomes more systematically.

In practice, the model has proven particularly useful in contexts where traditional formal education frameworks fail to equip young people with the skills required for navigating intercultural encounters. Yet, several challenges emerged during implementation. Logistical difficulties—such as time constraints, inconsistent group dynamics, and varying levels of English proficiency—occasionally impeded the flow of activities. Cultural adaptation also required careful facilitation, especially in exercises involving sensitive topics such as stereotypes, privilege, or national identity. Additionally, while the model was tested across diverse national contexts, the sample sizes remained small and not demographically representative, which limits the generalizability of findings.

Future work should consider adapting the Culture Detectives Model for use in formal education settings and younger age groups. Longitudinal studies could help assess the lasting effects of the intervention on learners' attitudes and behaviours. Comparative studies with other intercultural training models would further situate the model within the broader landscape of intercultural education research.

In summary, the Culture Detectives Model is a theoretically grounded, and practice-oriented tool, and contributes to the field of intercultural education. Nevertheless it needs further refinement, empirical validation, and theoretical expansion to to ensure its effectiveness and impact.

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