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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

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Chapter 3: Success or Failure? Establishing communication In International Collaboration

Ingrid Reite Christensen[1]

Abstract

In this chapter, I will explore the philosophical question of communication within the context of international collaboration. The focus of this article is a joint international project dedicated to democracy education in Ukraine and Norway. I narrate the story of two sessions at a seminar in Kyiv, where the first session followed a conventional academic presentation format, while the second session took an unconventional turn, having markedly different effects on the audience. I employ the methodological framework of philosophical inquiry (Helskog & Weiss, 2023; Helskog, 2019; Lindseth, 2021; Weiss, 2015), selecting one narrated case that delves into the philosophical query of "What is communication in international collaboration?". With the starting point in the Kyiv seminar, I conduct an exploratory reflection, searching for perspectives on communication in the light of classical didactics, liberation pedagogy and selected readings of Jacques Derrida. Rather than providing the keys to successful communication, the paper explores the dynamics of communication in international collaboration between success and failure.

Part 1 Introduction: The project of developing democracy education in Ukraine and the challenge of communication

Communication is at the core of an international project to succeed (Teunissen, Dierx et al., 2023, pp. 50–51). Effective communication is fundamental and a prerequisite for the approval of international projects[2], demanding a thorough grasp of the partners' contextual backgrounds, clear articulation of project goals and objectives, and a comprehensive assessment of po-

tential risks of difference that might impede the project's success. In this paper, I will explore communication in an international project on democracy education in Ukraine and Norway – two countries with vastly different conditions for democracy. However, as this paper will reveal, the lack of communication represents a foundational risk.

The Eurasia-funded project "Developing Democracy in Teacher Education in Ukraine, Palestine, and Norway" (2017–2022) was developed between the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (NPDU) in Kyiv, Donbas State Pedagogical University in eastern Ukraine and the non-governmental organization Peace Research Institute in Palestine (PRIME), having a third-country advisory role. Using a "train-the-trainer" model, the project implemented democratic principles across various school subjects, including mathematics, science, and social science, as well as a course in philosophical dialogue in Ukraine.

There is no doubt that the contexts of a democracy education project in Ukraine and Norway are markedly different and have recently also been burdened by the present war in Ukraine. Yet, over the past decades, Ukraine has undergone significant societal changes as a post-Soviet country and has increasingly aligned itself with the European community over the last decade (Shyyan & Shyyan, 2023). Pre-war empirical research in Ukraine has primarily focused on the challenges of implementing civic education within a robust public education system (e.g., Fediy et al., 2021). In 2017, the national curriculum introduced the promotion of civic competencies across all subjects through the interdisciplinary theme of "Civil Responsibility" (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2017). Furthermore, in 2019, an interdisciplinary subject titled "I explore the world" was introduced, based on democratic learning methods (Ministry of Education Ukraine, 2019). Programmes for implementing democracy education in schools have garnered international attention, drawing inspiration from models proposed by the Council of Europe or the OECD's 21st-century skills framework (The European Wergeland Centre, 2021; Kolesnyk and Biseth, 2023). The recent developments, including the war in Ukraine since 2022, have put long-term projects on hold and altered the agendas and activities in the Eurasia project presented in this paper. Many project participants are now refugees, either internally displaced or in Europe.

In contrast, Norway is widely recognized as one of the world's most stable democracies (Freedom House, 2022), boasting a robust public welfare society and educational system. Democracy and citizenship have played central roles in Norwegian education throughout the last century and have

recently been integrated as interdisciplinary topics across all school subjects (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).

When establishing the Eurasia project, effective communication between the partners was all but a given, requiring extensive efforts to build a strong foundation for collaboration. While Norwegians tend to adopt an informal approach – eschewing titles and formalities – our visits to Ukraine underscored the importance of hierarchy and etiquette. This became evident in how colleagues were introduced, how students stepped aside when teachers entered the room, and in the structured, formal interactions we encountered.

National Pedagogical Dragomanov University extended warm hospitality, introducing us to faculty heads, deans, and colleagues. Meetings were accompanied by coffee and sweets, and polite attentiveness was the norm. Our Ukrainian hosts also took us to cultural events, such as classical music concerts, and treated us to traditional Ukrainian cuisine. We were even granted the privilege of using the golden elevator at Dragomanov University, typically reserved for high-ranking guests.

Despite this generous hospitality, we struggled with deeper conceptual differences related to democracy. Language barriers compounded these challenges, as English was rarely spoken, necessitating simultaneous translation. More significantly, our differing educational and political contexts shaped how democracy was understood, adding layers of risk and complexity to our communication.

One session – two worlds

During the initial phase of the project, my colleague Øyvind and I conducted several introductory sessions on democracy education for our partners and their colleagues, and some lectures for their students. The first work package of the project emphasized the establishment of a common understanding of the concept of democracy, which we saw as crucial for the project's success. However, establishing this common understanding proved to be a challenging task. In the next sections, I will present two sessions held at a seminar in Kyiv, providing a snapshot of the project in its early stages in 2018.

This story takes place at a seminar at National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, our main partner. Our project coordinators at Dragomanov had invited a lot of staff. They showed great hospitality, serving us

coffee and sweets, as usual, and attending a session with two presentations from our Norwegian team.

The "excellent" academic presentation

In the first session, I prepared a presentation on different conceptual approaches to democracy. From my side, I was a little troubled by the concept of "democracy" standing out as an ideal and a repeated word in our meetings, but with very few descriptions of the nuances and different understandings of it. For the Ukrainian team, democracy education seemed to appear as a European standard to effectively be implemented. I hoped that at least some would be familiar and stir recognition as relevant by our Ukrainian colleagues.

I had therefore prepared a presentation of different conceptual understandings of democracy in education. I used PowerPoint as a visual support, with some pictures, making sure to have only a few keywords on each slide. All the sentences were translated from English to Ukrainian. The presentation followed the usual academic conference papers, with a research problem. It connected to a relevant research context, showing a systematic spectrum, and it ended with a challenging conclusion. The presentation had both common everyday definitions but also a quite high academic level (not too bad, maybe excellent, according to me). I included a good overview of the recent and updated references on the democracy academic conceptions and gave practical examples about democracy teaching. Now I hoped once and for all to start the real discussions on democracy education, to communicate.

However, my hopes were baffled. The staff looked distracted, and none of the concepts or examples seemed to hit the target. They seemed to be bored; they looked at their phones, and some of them wandered around. There was nothing to discuss at the end. I had a very strong feeling that I was speaking to a wall; I felt I missed the target.

The crawling professor and his presentation

The next speaker, Sikunder[3], a mathematics teacher from the University of South-Eastern Norway, had prepared a presentation on critical thinking as a democratic skill. I did not know him well, but my initial impression was that this person seemed gentle, polite, and reserved. However, as he began

speaking, I was taken by surprise. He suddenly shifted his tone and started passionately to express his love of mathematics. He was like an explosion – bursting with energy, speaking eagerly, and waving his arms. His presentation was a stark contrast to the Ukrainian formal behaviour I had observed among the Ukrainian staff. I began to worry about how they would react to this, and then it became even more dramatic; Sikunder threw himself on the floor and started crawling. Now, I feared the Ukrainians would be offended. Next, Sikunder showed a PowerPoint slide with a picture of a chessboard. He invited the participants to tell him how many squares there were on a chessboard, starting with the obvious 64, but the number kept expanding in the dialogue with the audience. Sikunder spoke about the many examples in mathematics where "the correct answer" is not possible. He demonstrated the flexibility of mathematics and the potential to foster critical thinking and democratic values through dialogue with the students. The response took me by surprise; the Ukrainian university staff burst out with questions, comments, laughter, and smiles, clapping their hands in excitement. I was also moved, somehow touched, and in wonder; there was no doubt that Sikunder was truly communicating.

Part 2: Beyond "failure" and "success" in communication: Key question and methodological steps of reflection

The Kyiv seminar has sparked many questions and loops of reflection. My initial reaction was a sense of failure in communication. However, moving beyond this intuitive judgement, I have engaged in more constructive reflection. The reflections have narrowed into a single question, which forms the research question for this paper: *What is communication in* international collaboration?

This theoretical paper draws on key methodological elements from reflective practice research (Helskog & Weiss, 2023; Helskog, 2019; Lindseth, 2021; Weiss, 2015). Reflective practice takes on a subjective, specific methodological approach. The study is not developed as an empirical study but is a *theoretical and philosophical* exploration. I employ an inductive logic, taking a starting point in the subjective life-world experiences.

Reflective practice research sees personal experience as a pivot point in knowledge development. I take the stance that knowledge and wisdom are socially and materially constituted (Parmiggiani & Mikalsen, 2013) and that practical examples bring knowledge into being as an "apparatus of bod-

ily production" (Haraway, 1994, p. 521). However, the individual and personal are not confined to a private sphere, but they serve as essential means for recognition and invite the readers to a "community of inquiry" (Weiss, 2021, p. 242). A reflective practice approach can foster meaningful points of orientation rather than merely conveying factual knowledge (Lindseth, 2017; Weiss, 2021). This does not mean that the paper abandons its mandate to provide conclusions. Instead, reflective research seeks to develop systematized accounts of philosophical testing and exploring meaning, providing theoretical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Methodologically, this paper follows an exploratory three-step approach, as outlined by Lindseth (2020; 2023), which can be summarized as follows:

Step 1: *Narrating a personal experience* marked by wonder, discrepancy or surprise, such as the experiences from the Kyiv seminar. The narration also includes an introductory analysis that shifts from immediate experience to an exploration of meaningful possibilities (Helskog & Weiss, 2023), asking, "What is at stake in this story?" As I wandered the streets of Kyiv, I became convinced that the two sessions were not merely about personal failure or success in delivering a presentation. Instead, I became increasingly curious and eager about the dynamics of communication with our project partners: Why was Sikunder communicating so well? Why was I not? During the one-hour seminar, I found myself part of two different audiences, navigating two distinct communication styles, where Sikunder provided an excellent example of the better.

Step 2: *Critical reflection and selecting a philosophical question.* At this stage, the goal is to change from personal reflection to relevant issues in a professional context (Husserl, 1970). As I reflected on the situation in Kyiv, I realized that the experience was not simply a case of "good" versus "bad" communication. Instead, I was eager to understand the underlying principles that shaped communication at the sessions, recognizing their significance for our future as partners in the democracy project.

Step 3: *Theoretical and philosophical reflection*. This step involves exploring aspects of experience and situating personal narratives within broader theoretical, reflective, and existential frameworks (Helskog & Weiss, 2023). After the Kyiv seminar, I felt challenged to engage with profound and philosophical questions about communication across international contexts. As a result, I reframed the research problem into a philosophical inquiry, asking, *What is communication?*

This step represents an in-depth reflection on communication in the context of the Kyiv seminar. Yet rather than providing an extensive account of communication or international collaboration, I explore selected philosophical approaches to communication, conducting "test paths" of thought through pedagogical theories (Imsen, 2008, and Freire (2005/1970)), followed by a more in-depth reflection on Derrida's deconstructive approach to communication (1976/1997; 1972; 1976/1980; 1982/2007; 1994/2005). Along the road of this critical reflection, I acknowledge potential dead ends while searching for more constructive insights.

Part 3: Reflective paths and questions: What is communication?

First and foremost, I assume that communication is more than a linear process in which a sender transmits a message to a receiver through specific means, as proposed in classical communication literature (Schramm, 1954; McQuail & Windahl, 2015). I suggest that the Kyiv seminar invites a more complex reflection, where communication appears messy and multifaceted. This analysis will proceed step by step, beginning with the foundational theories essential for an educator and eventually engaging in philosophical accounts of communication.

Communication as didactical facilitation or dynamics and interaction?

As an educator, my first theoretical reflection on communication involves evaluating my teaching. Of course, I question whether I used the appropriate teaching tools. From this perspective, the communication at the Kyiv seminar could be considered a didactic issue, assessing how effectively the presenters facilitated their sessions. The two sessions can be described as fundamentally different approaches to didactical facilitation. Among educators, it is widely recognized that teachers should adjust their teaching methods to the audience. Didactics embrace principles for effective teaching, including motivation, activation, concretization, variation, and individualization (Imsen, 2008, p. 242). Sikunder's presentation appeared to align with several of these principles. For instance, Sikunder used a simple and *concrete* example by displaying a picture of a chessboard. He *activated* the audience by posing a question. Sikunder demonstrated *variation* by break-

ing away from the conventional academic presentation style – even going so far as to crawl on the floor.

However, while any teacher should facilitate learning, evaluating the sessions solely through the lens of didactical tools might have some shortcomings. On the one hand, analysing communication from a didactical perspective might overlook some key aspects of the experience. For instance, didactics focus on the presenter's methods but fail to address the perception of communication, such as the element of surprise that the crawling professor brought to the session. Additionally, if Sikunder were to crawl again in a *future* session, it is unlikely that it would have had the same impact on the audience. There is also no guarantee that Sikunder's session would have been as effective if *I* were the one who crawled the floor. A mere focus on the didactical tools for communication might not be sufficient. The didactical perspective represents a quite technical way of describing communication, which may have less potential for generalizing about communication in the context of the Kyiv seminar. Analysing the seminar from this perspective risks adhering to a classical model of communication, where a message is delivered to a recipient. (Schramm) However, a didactical approach emphasizes the presenter's actions for facilitating learning but does not account for how it will be received or understood. Therefore, the didactical perspective may overlook the *actual dynamics* and interactions of the situation, failing to address the meaning-making that unfolded at the Kyiv seminar.

Reflecting on power contexts and subtexts in international collaboration

Understanding power dynamics is crucial in an international collaboration between countries like Norway and Ukraine. When applying for funding and conducting international projects, it is essential to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the different contexts involved. As a developing democracy has been a central aspect of Ukraine's orientation towards Europe, Norway is often viewed as an example of an "ideal democracy". Therefore, understanding the communication dynamics at the Kyiv seminar requires considering the potential power imbalances between the partners (Buckner & Stein, 2019).

The Western apparatus of language and communication has been widely criticized by decolonial writers (e.g., Thiong'o, 1938; Mignolo,

2011). As an educator, an intuitive starting point for reflection might be Paolo Freire's decolonial critique of the lack of dialogue in traditional education. In brief, Freire criticizes what he calls the "banking method", where a teacher delivers knowledge to students as ready-made facts to be received, memorized, and stored (Freire, 2005/1970, pp. 70–73). Beyond critiquing the teaching methods of the banking model, Freire highlights how both teaching practices and the content of knowledge may embody and reproduce socially oppressive structures. For Freire, a teacher using the banking method does not engage in real communication but instead creates a one-way "communiqué" (Ibid., p. 65). As an alternative, Freire proposes a dialogical process that encourages students to ask their own questions. This dialogue fosters critical consciousness (conscientização) and can lead to deliberation (Ibid., pp. 77, 139).

In this case, Norway holds a superior role in modelling the democracy standards that are pursued in Ukraine. I will therefore not downplay the importance of understanding the context and subtexts of communication. Yet, considering *the content* of my presentation, I did not merely deliver a "ready-made" knowledge package. Instead, I sought to present various definitions of democracy while maintaining a critical stance against singular and rigid interpretations of democracy. The content was promoted cautiously, and I intended to invite dialogue. If I failed in communicating, there might be other constraints beyond my knowledge. Although the presentation itself was not an example of *good* communication, dismissing it as non-communication might not be fully correct. Yet, my presentation could then very well be a demonstration of aggregated power for the audience; I represented a superior academic culture, telling the Ukrainians about Western democracy concepts and demonstrating academic excellence, in addition to an already dominating financial position in the project. In contrast, Sikunder's presentation in Kyiv offered the possibility of dialogue. He invited the participants to respond to his questions, and through the responses, he asked new questions. Sikunder also encouraged steps towards critical thinking by challenging an everyday assumption that a chessboard has 64 squares. In this way, Sikunder represented a few elements of dialogical pedagogy, which worked better. However, I hold that the reason for any worse or better communication at the seminar did not lie in more or less dialogue. Freire's contribution to the Kyiv seminar might be how he raises the awareness that knowledge always carries a subtext of power. The seminar held several potential subtexts of power. For instance, I was a representative of the project owner and managed the funding of the project, increasing the

barrier to commenting and possibly adding constraints to communication. Being a Norwegian, I might also be considered a representative of Norway's "successful" democracy in the eyes of Ukrainians. On top of that, the format followed an academic one-way presentation, with my Ukrainian colleagues as passive listeners. According to Freire, this type of one-way teaching constitutes a mere "communique", implying a lack of real communication. Considering the subtexts, maybe *any* communication that day and that place – and by me as a project coordinator – was a more difficult task than I could imagine.

Although Freire outlines key steps toward dialogue and communication, his theory primarily presents communication as a matter of power embedded in social, political, and educational contexts. He emphasizes structural critique, arguing that education should emerge from the lived experiences and questions of learners within their environments. Freire's account of communication describes power *in context*. At the Kyiv seminar, the national and local contexts make up an important frame for understanding possibilities and constraints to communication. However, the Freire account seems to focus on how possibilities and constraints to communication might be determined from *external factors and structures*, which might be too extensive for analysing the communication that took place at the Kyiv seminar. The Kyiv seminar also involves other dynamics of communication on a more fundamental and existential level: Questions that better embrace the experience of the impossibility of ever reaching a common understanding between Ukraine and Norway. In that matter, there is a need for an account of the subtexts of power.

As an alternative, I turn to deconstruction as presented by Jacques Derrida (1976/1997; 1972; 1976/1980; 1982/2007; 1994/2005). Derrida addresses power as something woven into the fabric of language and meaning itself, operating subtly through texts and questioning the foundational assumptions and conditions for communication. Employing a linguistic and philosophical approach to communication, Derrida characterizes Western academia as "logocentric", privileging the written word. Derrida questions the hidden assumption of the written word as superior, pointing out how the written word suppresses other language systems and counts them as less accurate and less real. He states: "There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body" (Derrida 1976/1997, p. 17). Many non-Western cultures put less emphasis on verbal language and rely on various expressions of pictures, gestures,

and metaphors. From a Western perspective, these alternative expressions are often held as less true knowledge. Consequently, Derrida holds that the Western language may narrow our understanding and overlook important dimensions of knowing.

At first glance, Derrida's criticisms of Western logocentrism are irrelevant, as Ukraine is part of Europe and has a highly verbal culture. None of the participants at the seminar who participated could be considered "non-western" representatives. Furthermore, both presentations at the seminar can be categorized as verbal. However, the *format* of the presentations differed. I used the format of an academic verbal presentation as a demonstration. It displayed an overview of several and updated accounts of democracy education. However, I did not adopt any "banking method" to communicate the democracy concept, whereas I presented democracy as fixed content knowledge for the audience to learn. Instead, I presented a "menu" of various approaches to democracy for the audience. I had a sincere, though perhaps far-fetched, hope of communicating and establishing recognition through verbal concepts across our contexts. For that task, the toolbox still proved to be limited. Nevertheless, Sikunder's approach seemed to work better at the seminar; it took less than a minute before he crawled on the floor. In my view, communication was established through gestures and pictures, creating anything but a traditional power language.

Derrida's critique of logocentrism does not deny the necessity of verbal language as such, as he also states that "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1976, p. 158). In my presentation, I am dependent on and constituted by my available means of communication. I take the stance that every interpretation is intrinsically interwoven by words, bodies, and minds (Barad, 2007, p. 185). At the seminar, I could only try to imagine others' prior understanding and readings about democracy. Making an overview of the approaches to democracy education was, therefore, a deliberate act where I hoped for certain common interpretations. Nevertheless, a central idea of Derrida is that interpretation and signification are "never present". This can imply that I cannot convey a message that is shared and understood in that moment. Interpretation is not fixed; it is always in flux. (Derrida, 1972b, p. 18). The point of Derrida is that we can be led astray by a blind *belief* in the truthfulness of words and their power to create a common understanding. Drawing on Derrida's perspective, I recognize that my toolbox for communication was limited, and the task of ensuring a common understanding of democracy education was impossible, at least according to the settled ideals in the project description. There is a *subtext* to commu-

nication that not only creates doubts about Western academic ideals but also challenges our belief in the truth and powers of the structures of language as a means of communication.

What is communication? Constructive ideas from deconstruction

So far in this reflection, I have gained insights that communication at the Kyiv seminar might be understood as more than mere teaching techniques while taking the contexts and power subtexts of communication. However, the question of what communication actually *is,* remains open.

In the following section, a more in-depth reflection is needed, where I will explore the deconstructive approach further. A deconstructive approach challenges the idea of communication as a mere "phenomenon" to be studied:

> "Is it certain that there corresponds to the word communication a unique, univocal concept, a concept that can be rigorously grasped and transmitted; a communicable concept?" (Derrida, 1982/2007, p. 309).

Some critics associate Derrida and his deconstruction approach with relativism (Searle, 1993) and nihilism and rejection of objective truth and meaning (Habermas, 1987). In some respects, they might be correct. Derrida deliberately refrains from any static understanding that seeks to define fixed components of communication, stating:

> "... one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier "communication" communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value." (Derrida, 1977/1997, p. 1)

In further reflection, I explore Derrida's notions of communication with its limits and dynamics. By reading Derrida, I value his curiosity and how he observes communication as finely tuned dynamics rather than a stable phenomenon. The Kyiv seminar draws attention to what can be created in the moment.

The ideas of deconstruction can give the impression that there are no conceptual grounds for communication and that our efforts to create a common understanding of democracy across Ukraine and Norway are a difficult starting point. Communication is, above all, a risky enterprise. In international collaboration, communication becomes an even more complex task.

Derrida (1976/1980, pp. 146–147) holds that communication can be seen as "... contextual, essentially limited, unstable, and endangered". The outcome of a presentation is therefore beyond the speaker's control, and neither Sikunder nor I could be fully prepared for the audience's reactions, which will always differ from what we imagine.

According to a deconstructive approach, it is less relevant to study the calculated actions, words, and gestures of communication than to pay attention to their *effects*. Derrida says: "Deconstruction is not a neutralization; it is operative and describes effects. (Derrida, 1982/2007, p. 131). Derrida invites us to consider the acts and activities of communication beyond mere intention. He provides what I see as sensitizing concepts, drawing my attention to how communication shifts, how it is received, and how it is shaped by contexts and subtexts that challenge the intended message. In further analysis, the three notions of différance, iterability, and delay/play will guide the exploration of what those actions and words "do" in communication at the seminar in Kyiv.

From seeking a common understanding to différance

In international collaboration, establishing a "common understanding" is crucial. It was considered a pillar of the international project and a key component of the primary work package in the project. Therefore, arranging meetings to establish a common understanding was at the core of a successful project. Yet, one of the overarching ideas of Derrida lies in the notion of "différance". The term derives from the French words "deferment" (delay) and "difference". Derrida takes the stance that there is no such thing as a "common meaning" to be conveyed in communication. Derrida criticizes the idea that one can predict future communication by analysing prior communication patterns. "Différance" does not denote differences between things and empirical phenomena, but he rather wants to draw attention to how meaning cannot be carried unchanged from one context to another. According to Derrida, a "core" meaning cannot exist in communication. "Le thème de la différance est incompatible v le motif statique, synchronique, taxinomique, anhistorique, etc., du concept de structure." (Derrida, 1972, p. 39). Derrida refrains from settling on identifying assets or static classifications of communication. This means, for instance, that it might be naïve to believe that there is a structure for communication across contexts.

Considering my experience of failure in Kyiv, I find the notion of différance to be relieving. It is not a given that it would be possible to create a common understanding. A common understanding cannot be based on assumed similarities between the contexts for democracy education in Norway and Ukraine. Although I had the experience that Sikunder's presentation communicated better than mine at the seminar. Yet, Derrida underlines that one cannot analyse communication patterns in an instrumental way to predict or improve future communication. As a consequence, it is not meaningful to analyse the technical details of Sikunder's or my presentation forms. Neither the chessboard nor crawling are all-encompassing assets for securing a common understanding that works at any time and in all contexts. I also acknowledge that my academic presentation format can be useful in several other international settings. With Derrida, I pose the question if we ever were *supposed to* reach a common understanding of the concept of democracy in Kyiv. Instead of holding on to a far-fetched hope of promoting a common understanding through academic standards at the seminar, the awareness of difference can maybe create other insights about the dynamics of communication.

Derrida introduces the concept of différance, an overarching idea in communication. I have selected three key dynamics of différance: interruption/delay, iterability, and play. These concepts can make up interesting lenses for a further reflection on communication at the Kyiv seminar.

From smooth communication to interruption and delay

One does not have to attend the Kyiv seminar to realize that communication is anything but a neat, linear process from sender to receiver. In that respect, both my traditional presentation and Sikunder's untraditional presentation illustrate this point quite well. Neither of us communicated in ways that could be characterized as "neat", either in format or in the effects their messages had on the audience. Derrida introduces a temporal understanding of communication through the terms "interruption" and "delay".

The first temporal condition of communication can be described as a dynamic of *interruption*. Interruption does not mean the act of one person cutting off another in a conversation. Derrida holds that "... if there was a definition of différance, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption" (Derrida, 1972, p. 55, own translation). A message cannot be communicated as "one package" but is always *interrupted* in the act of communication.

Through the concept of interruption, Derrida introduces a temporal dimension, as if he urges us to pause and become aware of the moments within a communicative transaction. In doing so, Derrida challenges communication theories that focus on the linear movement of a message, as well as those that analyse the constraints and possibilities for communication. The idea of linear movement is deferred; even before a message reaches its recipient, it is already interrupted.

For Derrida, communication can be understood as a form of absence, meaning that it does not exist as a fully formed state. Derrida (1972, p. 315) explains about the written text:

"The absence of the sender, the receiver, the referent of the contextual conditions that could fix the meaning of a sign is not an accident but the very structure of writing. The mark carries within itself the structure of an absence that is the condition of its functioning."

Derrida's description of absence does not imply that communication lacks meaning. On the contrary, communication is rather saturated with meaning, though as a means between the sender and the receiver as isolated actors.

At the Kyiv seminar, Sikunder and I attempted to reinforce the meaning of a message by using words, presentation tools, and gestures to reinforce our messages. Derrida argues that these are not necessarily clarifying means of a message. Instead, they can interrupt initial thoughts or agendas between the parties and initiate interactions we cannot predict. The two sessions at the Kyiv seminar are two different examples of interruption: My presentation was correct and quite "excellent" in a Western academic sense. And still, while presenting at the seminar, the intentions fell apart and created distance and even defensiveness among the audience. The concepts and meanings did not function as stable and transmissible; Sikunder's session represented an interruption of other premises: He broke the barriers between the Norwegian and the Ukrainian participants by taking on other forms of language, creating surprise and amazement among the academics. At the Kyiv seminar, I see the interruption and the surprise as more than a calculated tactic from Sikunder's side. The interruption could very well represent a rupture and estrangement rather than engagement. In this situation, however, this interruption created an open-ended moment where the audience was invited to participate.

Then, the next question is what happens when the audience is involved. However, at the Kyiv seminar, Sikunder not only surprised the audience. The interruption also paves the way for something more. According to

Derrida, meaning is never fully present and self-contained. Derrida holds that "truth must hold the possibility of misunderstanding into account" (1976/1980, pp. 146–147). Every form of communication involves a *delay*. This delay implies that a message takes loops, as the participants connect words and signs to multiple experiences in time and space. Meaning is deferred in time and space, dependent on context, participants, experiences, and agencies. Words like "democracy" can by no means bear a direct reference to a specific meaning for anyone in the audience. Each participant makes their own associations to it, connecting democracy to experience, times, and places where a concept like democracy makes sense.

Iterability: From the intended message to play

The next question is: Is it even possible to communicate a message to an audience if it is always interrupted and delayed? At the Kyiv seminar, I was fully aware of many of the challenges of obtaining a common understanding of democracy across Ukraine and Norway. My best strategy was to establish common concepts by referring to academic papers and theories. I sincerely hoped that the references to the theoretical papers would create a sense of repetition if they recognized the democracy concepts I presented, thus easing further communication about democracy. However, although my academic presentation seemed to follow an academic and seemingly "contextless" script, it caused estrangement rather than recognition. Perhaps it also created distance, reinforced by the academic format as an authoritative and exclusive discourse.

Derrida explores the conditions for communication in written papers. A common assumption about written text is that making a message "contextless" allows it to be repeated and spread across contexts. By introducing the terms "iterability", "repetition", Derrida challenges the idea that academic texts are contextless.

> "What is remarkable about writing – as about all signs – is that it can function even in the absence of the sender, receiver, and referent. This is possible only because the mark is iterable, repeatable in different contexts, even if those contexts radically transform its meaning." (*Margins of Philosophy*, 1982/2007, p. 315)

Derrida describes the path where a written text moves from reader to reader and draws attention to two dynamics of iterability: repetition and transformation. First, the written text provides a *repetition*.

However, as a message is repeated, the situation, the context, and all participants act upon the message in various ways. The moment a message is presented, it also comes with huge risks: the participants interpret, engage, ignore, and involve their former experience, and use their imagination. The message becomes *transformed* through the context and its reception. To Derrida, meaning is never fixed, only a chain of differences and reconstructions.

According to Derrida, this transformation is not a particular threat to the original repetition but should be regarded as *a play.* "Différance is the play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other". (Derrida 1982/2007, p. 21). Consequently, communication is less a calculated action and more a *creative activity*.

Deconstructivism underlines this play in communication. In the foreword to Derrida's work, Spivak holds that "[. . . . Knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of a truth that is hidden but may be found. It is rather the field of free play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble." (Spivak in Derrida, 1976/1980, p. xix). One could say that Derrida's account of communication bears on elements from a "whispering game", where the intended meaning is displaced by each repetition, an object to a freeplay and transformation, with an unpredictable outcome.

Repetition and play are also central notions for reflecting on Sikunder's presentation. I would say that Sikunder provided repetition and recognition, as he drew on well-known concepts with his chessboard and asked simple questions about the number of squares on the board – an easy question to answer. The audience could feel at home with his questions, despite his untraditional behaviour.

However, it is also likely to think about Sikunder's talk as a form of play. From the very beginning, his message appeared somewhat chaotic; he spoke hastily and with great enthusiasm. He crawled, moved around, presented an image of a chessboard, and asked questions. Like me, Sikunder spoke in English and required translation into Ukrainian. Nothing seemed neatly structured. At first glance, his speech seemed to lack the conciseness and clarity expected in an academic setting.

Through the reflection on communication, we can observe how the sessions opened and constrained communication. The sessions had potential for both. Yet, instead of striving to establish any common understanding based on similarities, I believe Sikunder succeeded in embracing differ-

ences. What he had at hand was the opportunity to play with expectations, both in relation to the concept of democracy and the norms of an academic presentation. Rather than making a message tidy and comprehensible, I believe he led the audience to grasp the idea of democracy as an unfinished project – and an agora, a meeting place where there is room for difference.

A crucial element in reflecting on communication is not to observe repetition as a pedagogical or structural manoeuvre, but rather to draw attention to the transformation of communication and the dynamics that are created. Reflecting beyond Derrida, I seek what lies beyond the presentation and the dramaturgy and mess of signs, gestures, words, and crawling. Sikunder brought a high-risk project into the room, where seemingly anything could happen. It was a transformative moment. My immediate thought is that Sikunder created an open *space of possibilities* for the audience. In that manner, the space of possibility can be called a "speech act" (Butler, 1997, p. 3). Perhaps the space at the Kiev seminar can be described as a sense of capability, enabling the participants to envision how to engage with democracy and critical thinking in their own classrooms. Thus, Sikunder might have struck a nerve – namely, a hope for developing democracy in education and more practically supporting them in their teaching tasks.

Part 4: The quest for meaningful connections

In this chapter, I present the story of two presentations held at a seminar in Kyiv by a Norwegian team for colleagues in a Eurasia project focused on developing democracy education in Ukraine and Norway. Since the Kyiv seminar was one of the project's first activities, it was a primary goal to establish common ground and (hopefully) ensure good alignment of key objectives and concepts. In short, everything rose and fell on good communication.

Most project funders, coordinators, and university managers engaged in international collaboration find that communication is at the core of a project's success. However, as the two sessions at the Kyiv seminar demonstrated, this communication is anything but a quick fix. While my own traditional academic presentation appeared to fall flat, Sikunder's unconventional approach resonated with the audience, despite a university setting that usually values tradition and formalities. This contrast led beyond an initial, intuitive judgement of my own presentation as a mere "failure" and

stirred my curiosity to explore communication in international collaboration.

In this paper, I took a starting point in seeing communication as more of a settled phenomenon and a simple transmission process of messages between a sender and a receiver. I also move beyond the analysis of communication as matters of mere teaching techniques. My reflective process followed the steps suggested in reflective practice research (Helskog & Weiss, 2023), followed by the selection of one fundamental philosophical question: *What is communication in international collaboration?* My experiences at the Kyiv seminar make up a frame for an exploratory reflection on communication. Leaving the intuitive reactions behind, I briefly consult didactical theory before I move into communication as a philosophical question. I have asked a series of questions – each exploring the communication at the Kiev seminar that unfolds angles and tensions that add to the former. Through this exploratory reflection, certain trajectories have emerged, as illustrated in Figure 1 and listed below:

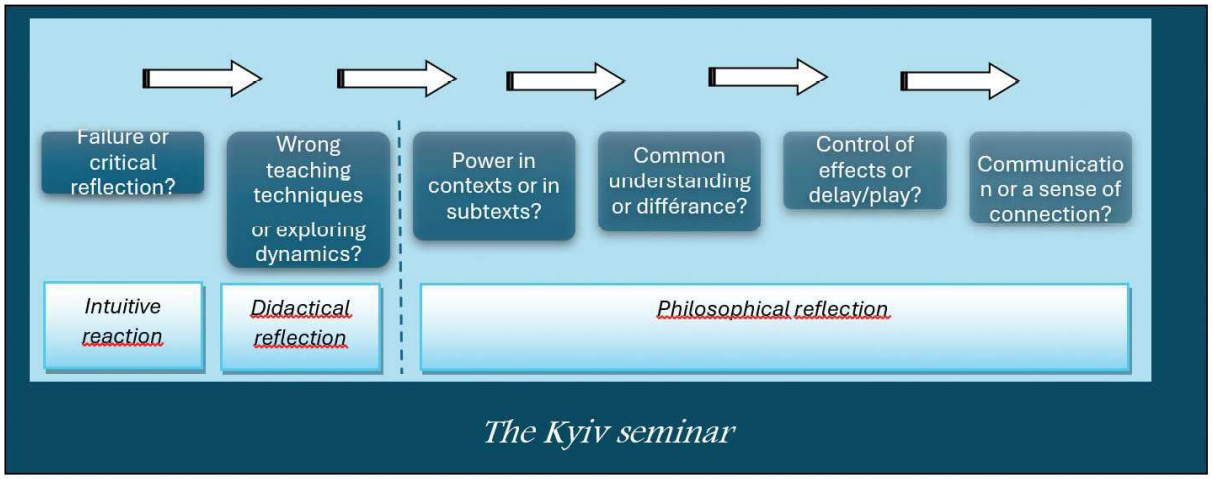


Figure 1: Overview of the reflection process of communication.

1. Intuitive reaction: From failure and success towards critical reflection
2. Didactical reflection: From wrong techniques to exploring dynamics
3. Philosophical reflection:
   a. From power in context to power in-text.
   b. From seeking a common understanding to embracing différance
   c. From smooth means of communication to interruption and delay
   d. From communication as control and intention to communication as play

Through this reflection process, some overall insights have unfolded. Intuitively, I would prefer streamlined communication processes, where the partners gradually can develop a common understanding, avoiding the energy-demanding task of clarifying the basics of international collaboration. Still, we are not handling similarities; instead, we are called to deal with difference. Difference represents a foundational condition for communication in international collaboration, implying the demand to accept differences and come to peace with difference. However, they also bring a sense of moral relief and humility toward difference. I understand the project partners and our communication as inherently incomplete and in change, and perhaps that is ok. International collaboration challenges, more than any other job task, to acknowledging the incomplete, the uncertain, and the acceptance moments when understanding remains just beyond reach.

Yet, even as we reflect on difference as a basic condition for communication, there is one central issue not yet addressed by deconstruction or any other account in this paper. It remains a mystery and a puzzle to be forwarded: What about the sense of feeling *connected* in international collaboration? What is this connection about?

I speak about *alignment*: the moments of finding ways to work together, where the project participants find each other and align toward each other across different contexts. It is a connection due to the alignment of tasks and solutions, where the teams become productive, despite differences, and in times of impossible obstacles, such as pandemics and war.

I speak about communication as *attunements*: the moments where difference and complexity are silenced for a short while. The sudden moments where the group becomes still and at peace, in the midst of the mess of working the systems and delivering results. The moments where you look at each other, and there is an instant connection, where you are finely attuned, and nobody wants to ruin the moment by speaking.

I speak about communication as a *communion*: From these moments, how do we become a unified "we", a communion? Perhaps there is a feeling that it is "us against the rest", and a union that eventually opens the gates for a deeper understanding of each other and the tasks the project is supposed to deliver. This sense of communion transcends mere cooperation, involving care, trust, and empathy.

These moments, however ephemeral, seem to resist analysis. They do not fit neatly into theories of communication, yet they matter deeply. Donna Haraway (1991) reminds us that "we're living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade."

As I conclude this reflection, I do not offer final answers. Instead, I invite further exploration of the conditions, possibilities, and mysteries of communication. A core lesson, for me as well as for project funders and universities, is that international collaboration involves more than academic knowledge and qualifications. More than anything, the ability to build reflective foundations of sensitivity, engagement, and the urge for wisdom will be decisive for the future of building international collaboration.

Notes

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[2] The 5-year project, spanning from 2017 to 2022, received funding from the Directorate for Higher Education and Internationalization in Norway (HK-Dir).

[3] The presenter's first name is published with his acceptance.

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