

BOOK REVIEW

Fred Dervin. *The Paradoxes of Interculturality: A Toolbox of Out-of-the-box Ideas for Intercultural Communication Education.* London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. i-vi, 1-132. ISBN 978- 032-44215-0 (hbk) ISBN 978- 032-44216-7 (pbk) ISBN: 978-1-003-37105-2 (ebk) DOI: 10.4324/9781003371052

Reviewed by **Diana-Alexandra Avram** , 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia

Received: 30 September 2025

Revised: 2 November 2025

Accepted: 21 November 2025

Published: 15 December 2025

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee JoLIE, “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\) license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Fred Dervin’s *The paradoxes of interculturality: A toolbox of out-of-the-box ideas for intercultural communication education* is a book that challenges rather than reassures. It does not aim to simplify interculturality or offer neat frameworks for understanding it. Instead, it unsettles the reader, constantly questioning what seems obvious and exposing the complexity behind a concept that is often taken for granted in education and research.

From the outset, Dervin makes it clear that this is not a conventional academic book. Rather than building a linear argument, he constructs a “toolbox” made of fragments—short reflections, questions, and observations that can be read independently or in relation to one another. This unusual structure reflects the central argument of the book: interculturality is not stable, not singular, and not something that can be fully understood through a single perspective. It is constantly shifting, contradictory, and open to reinterpretation.

The *Introduction*, titled *Questioning the obvious*, sets the tone for the entire book by immediately challenging the reader’s assumptions. Dervin compares interculturality to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, suggesting that people talk about it endlessly but never truly grasp it. This metaphor is powerful because it captures the sense of uncertainty that runs throughout the book.

In this chapter, Dervin introduces the idea that interculturality is inherently paradoxical. It is widely used in education and research, yet it remains vague and difficult to define. He argues that instead of trying to “solve” interculturality, we should accept its instability and continuously rethink it. The introduction also outlines the book’s main approach: encouraging readers to question dominant ideas, reflect critically on their own assumptions, and remain open to multiple perspectives.

Importantly, Dervin emphasises that interculturality is not neutral. It is shaped by political, economic, and historical forces, and any discussion of it must

take these factors into account. This sets the foundation for the more detailed critiques that follow in later chapters.

The book is further divided into two main parts, *Part I, Becoming aware of the paradoxes of interculturality* and *Part II, Dealing with the paradoxes of interculturality*.

The first part opens with *Chapter 2*, titled *The doxa of interculturality*, which examines the common assumptions and clichés that dominate discussions of interculturality. Dervin uses the concept of *doxa*—taken-for-granted beliefs—to highlight how certain ideas are repeated without being critically examined.

For example, concepts like openness, respect, and tolerance are often presented as essential components of intercultural communication. While these ideas sound positive, Dervin argues that they are rarely defined clearly and can mean very different things to different people. As a result, they risk becoming empty slogans rather than meaningful concepts.

This chapter is particularly effective in showing how easily interculturality can be reduced to simplified narratives. Dervin also points out that these narratives often reinforce binaries, such as “intercultural vs. non-intercultural” or “essentialist vs. non-essentialist,” which fail to capture the complexity of real-life interactions. By exposing these patterns, the chapter encourages readers to question what they might otherwise accept as obvious truths.

In *Chapter 3, Stances towards alternative knowledge*, Dervin shifts the focus to the dominance of Western perspectives in intercultural research and education. He explores the growing calls for de-westernising and decolonising knowledge, urging readers to consider alternative viewpoints from different parts of the world.

However, Dervin does not treat this as a simple solution. Instead, he highlights the challenges and potential contradictions involved in engaging with alternative knowledge. For instance, he questions whether scholars are genuinely open to different perspectives or merely incorporating them superficially to appear inclusive.

This chapter is particularly thought-provoking because it pushes readers to reflect on their own intellectual habits. Are we truly curious about other ways of thinking, or do we only engage with them when they fit our existing frameworks? Dervin’s critique is subtle but powerful, emphasising the need for humility and honesty in dealing with diverse forms of knowledge.

The fourth chapter, *The Achilles’ heels of interculturality*, focuses on the weaknesses and limitations within the field. Dervin uses the metaphor of Achilles’ heel to describe the vulnerable points in how interculturality is studied and taught.

Among the issues he identifies are the lack of interdisciplinarity, the tendency to rely on slogans rather than critical analysis, and an overconfidence in certain theoretical approaches. He also criticises the tendency to prioritise consumption of knowledge over its production, as well as the habit of giving prescriptive “orders” about how interculturality should be practiced.

What makes this chapter particularly compelling is its self-reflexive tone. Dervin does not position himself outside these problems; instead, he acknowledges

that he is also part of the system he critiques. This adds a layer of honesty to the discussion and reinforces the idea that no one is completely free from the limitations of the field.

The second part of the book moves from identifying problems to exploring possible ways of engaging with them. Rather than offering solutions, Dervin presents a series of questions and reflections that encourage ongoing critical thinking.

Chapter 5, *Towards a diversity of thoughts*, emphasises the importance of engaging with multiple perspectives. Dervin argues that interculturality cannot be understood through a single framework and that embracing a diversity of ideas is essential.

At the same time, he raises ethical questions about how this diversity is approached. Simply including different perspectives is not enough; it requires genuine engagement, openness, and a willingness to listen. Dervin introduces the idea of being “ready to share,” which involves not only expressing one’s own views but also being receptive to others.

This chapter highlights the importance of dialogue, but it also complicates it. Dialogue is not always equal, and power dynamics can shape who gets to speak and who is heard. By acknowledging these challenges, Dervin presents a more realistic and nuanced view of intercultural engagement.

In Chapter 6, *Criticality (of criticality)*, Dervin turns his attention to the concept of critical thinking itself. While criticality is often seen as a key component of intercultural education, he argues that it must also be applied to itself.

This chapter examines how claims of being “critical” can sometimes become superficial or even performative. For example, adopting certain theoretical positions, such as non-essentialism or decoloniality, does not automatically guarantee a genuinely critical approach. Instead, these positions can become new forms of orthodoxy if they are not questioned.

Dervin encourages readers to reflect on their own critical practices and to be aware of the limitations and biases that may shape them. This idea of being “critical of criticality” is one of the book’s most important contributions, as it pushes the reader to go beyond surface-level analysis.

Chapter 7, *Unthink and rethink*, serves as a kind of synthesis of the book’s main ideas. Here, Dervin introduces the concept of continuously questioning and revising one’s understanding of interculturality.

This involves paying attention to language, acknowledging personal experiences, and embracing discomfort as part of the learning process. Dervin suggests that working on interculturality should not be comfortable or straightforward; it should challenge us and force us to reconsider our assumptions.

The idea of “unthinking” is particularly significant. It implies that learning is not just about acquiring new knowledge but also about letting go of existing beliefs. This process is ongoing and never fully complete, reflecting the ever-changing nature of interculturality.

The eighth chapter, *Conclusion – Interculturality as an ongoing process*, reinforces the central message of the book: interculturality is not a fixed concept but

a continuous process. Derwin describes it as something that is constantly “weaving itself,” evolving through interactions, ideas, and contexts.

Rather than offering final answers, the conclusion encourages readers to continue exploring and questioning. It leaves the reader with a sense that the work of understanding interculturality is never finished, and that this openness is not a weakness but a strength.

One of the greatest strengths of *The paradoxes of interculturality* is its ability to challenge deeply ingrained assumptions. Derwin does not allow the reader to remain comfortable; instead, he pushes them to think critically about concepts that are often treated as self-evident.

The book’s fragmented structure may be difficult for some readers, especially those who prefer clear, linear arguments. At times, the lack of concrete answers can feel frustrating. However, this is also what makes the book unique. It does not aim to provide solutions but to provoke thought and reflection.

Another notable strength is the book’s emphasis on self-reflexivity. Derwin consistently reminds the reader that they are part of the process they are analysing. This creates a more engaging and personal reading experience, as it encourages active participation rather than passive consumption.

At the same time, the book’s abstract nature may limit its accessibility. Readers looking for practical guidance on intercultural communication may find it less useful. However, for those interested in exploring the theoretical and philosophical dimensions of the field, it offers valuable insights.

In the end, *The paradoxes of interculturality* is not a book that provides clear answers. Instead, it reshapes the way we think about interculturality itself. By highlighting its contradictions, questioning its assumptions, and encouraging continuous reflection, Derwin offers a fresh and challenging perspective on a concept that is often oversimplified.

It is a demanding read, but also a rewarding one. Rather than closing the discussion, it opens it up—leaving the reader with more questions than answers, and perhaps that is exactly what makes it so valuable.

References

Derwin, F. (2023). *The paradoxes of interculturality: A toolbox of out-of-the-box ideas for intercultural communication education*. Routledge. <http://doi.org/10.4324/9781003371052>