

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND ETHICS

The world, software, and me



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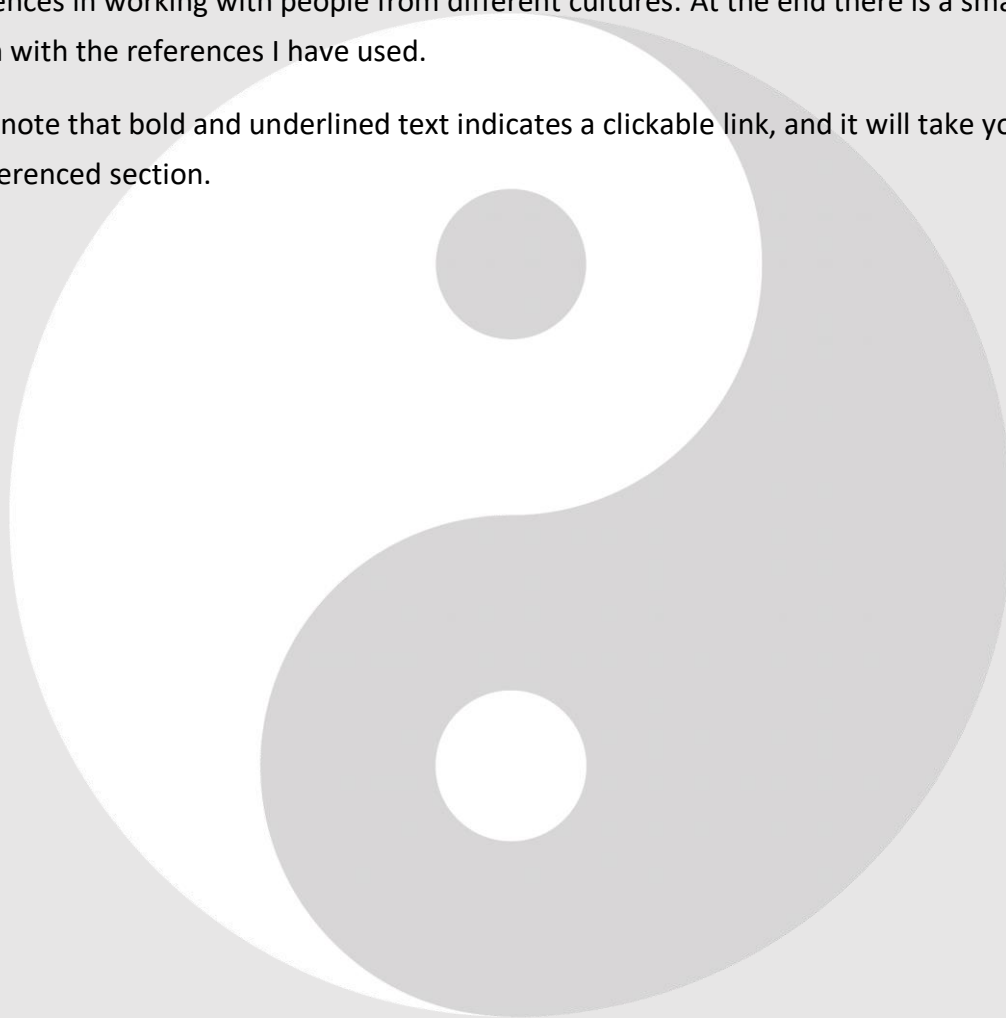
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1. INTRODUCTION

For this document, I split the learning outcome in two parts: Ethics & Cultural awareness. In the **Ethics** section, I discuss a handful of the ACM Code of Ethics, what they are, some examples of real-world cases and a conclusion. For the **Cultural awareness** section, I have conducted an interview with a member of the Global Acting Group and what they do. I also discuss the fine line between cultural and personal traits and finally, a section about my own experiences in working with people from different cultures. At the end there is a small section with the references I have used.

Please note that bold and underlined text indicates a clickable link, and it will take you to the referenced section.



2. ETHICS

Ethics are usually described as our own understanding of what is morally right and what is wrong. It can be hard to determine what the answers to those questions are, especially when software could reach millions of users all around the world, all with different backgrounds and cultures. For this section, I have taken “The Code” from the Association for Computing Machinery, or ACM for short, as the guidelines for this document. The reason for my decision is that they have a clear set of principles that I share and gives a good basic idea of what should be considered.

2.1 ACM Code of Ethics

The ACM came up with a set of principles to help and guide anyone who works in the computing sector and has an impact. Their mindset is as followed: “Computing professionals' actions change the world. To act responsibly, they should reflect upon the wider impacts of their work, consistently supporting the public good. The ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct ("the Code") expresses the conscience of the profession.” (Association for Computing Machinery, 2018)

I picked a handful of principles from the “1. General Ethical Principles” section based on topics that I want to talk about and how the principles relate to them. Showing the connection with additional information might make it easier to understand and adapt.

2.1.1 Principle 1.1: Contribute to society and to human well-being, acknowledging that all people are stakeholders in computing
This principle advocates for a safe social environment; meaning that developers should strive to keep something like a social media platform a place that is welcome to everybody and minimize the possibility of conflict between groups or individuals. A common practice to tackle this principle is creating “Community guidelines”, which contain recommendations or rules about the use of the platform. Users are urged to read and agree to this before signing up for an account on the platform.

2.1.1.1 Community guidelines

By implementing community guidelines, a platform creates some foundation in case of conflict; meaning that a user could for example be banned when they ignore the guidelines. These guidelines aim to improve the community over time and creating a pleasant experience for the users. Of course, guidelines are only meant to be a recommendation and are different from rules. Without going into too much detail, rules are essentially established guidelines. It is up to the platform to decide what happens when a user does not

follow the community guidelines. Usually, the guidelines receive an update over time and users will receive an e-mail telling them what is new.

An example of this is this “Code of Conduct”, created by Stack Overflow.¹ In their case, the Code of Conduct is aimed at literally everyone that uses the platform, not just normal users.



Screenshot of the Code of Conduct. Retrieved from Stack Overflow.

Another example of community guidelines are the Discord guidelines.

Respect Discord

- **Do not use Discord to spam, manipulate engagement, or disrupt other people's experience**, including trying to to influence or disrupt conversations using bots, fake accounts, multiple accounts, or other automation. This includes purchasing or selling methods of artificially increasing membership, such as via advertisements or botting.
- **Do not organize, promote, or engage in any illegal or dangerous behavior**, such as sexual solicitation, human trafficking, and selling or facilitating the sale of prohibited or potentially dangerous goods (firearms, ammunition, drugs, and controlled substances). These activities are likely to get you kicked off Discord, and may get you reported to law enforcement.
- **Do not abuse Discord products in any way**, such as selling or purchasing an account or server, or participating in fraudulent Nitro incentives or Boosting activities.
- **Do not use self-bots or user-bots**. Each account must be associated with a human, not a bot. Self-bots put strain on Discord's infrastructure and our ability to run our services. For more information, you can read our Developer Policies [here](#).
- **Do not mislead Discord's support teams**. Do not make false or malicious reports to Trust & Safety or Customer Support; send multiple reports about the same issue; or ask a group of users to report the same content or issue. These behaviors may result in action being taken on your account.

If you see any activity that violates these guidelines, our Terms of Service, or our other policies, please report it to us in the Discord mobile app or by filling out this [form](#).

Screenshot of the Discord community guidelines. This section is about misusing the platform.

¹ Read more about the Code of Conduct by Stack Overflow: <https://stackoverflow.com/conduct>

The screenshot above highlights the section about the use of Discord, going beyond the interaction of users. This also adheres to the first principle by taking into account what users could possibly do with the application outside of the platform itself. In this case, Discord urges users to not abuse the platform and in the last sentence, asks other users to report abuse. In this way, they include users in the contribution to society and enforcing the first principle. A different kind of consequence is here the case: If a user abuses the platform to cause trouble and the platform does not have any rules or guidelines that cover this, they could get a bad reputation and may eventually lead to the loss of the platform. In some cases it could even lead to a lawsuit.

2.1.1.2 Marktplaats

Marktplaats is a Dutch online marketplace website where users can buy all sorts of things offered by other users. As money is involved, the stakes are high when it comes to maintaining a safe and user-friendly environment. Marktplaats asks users to respect other users by showing the following alert:



Screenshot of an alert posted by the Dutch online marketplace Marktplaats.

This alert shows up whenever a chat with another user is opened. These kinds of reminders are a simple way of enforcing the first principle. It is common for marketplaces like this to avoid taking responsibility when there is conflict between two users, even when it is a specific issue like when somebody has not paid or sent the item. Here it is more of business

issue; if Marktplaats gets a bad reputation because of all the negativity caused by users, they will lose traffic and eventually lose the platform.

2.1.2 Principle 1.2: Avoid harm

Malware and other harmful software are designed to harm and violate this principle on purpose. But what about software that, while having good intentions, may still lead to harm in a certain, unexpected way? Principle 1.2 states that those responsible should undo the harm done as soon as possible. But it might not always be that easy. A very recent case that reflects this problem, is ChatGPT: a chatbot created by OpenAI.

2.1.2.1 “ChatGPT”

This chatbot can be asked to write emails, scripts, code, essays and more. It sounds very convenient and almost too good to be true. AI and its fast progression have been a topic of discussion as long as I can remember. It has made life easier and helps solving problems, but it can also take away the task of writing reports like this. I could have asked the chatbot to write this report about Ethics and Cultural awareness, and even Scribbr’s plagiarism checker would not notice.² This has been the cause in the educational sector and according to the Nationale Onderwijsgids, its impact is enough for some people to suggest “going back to the days of writing papers with pencils” to maintain integrity of the work done by students. (Nationale Onderwijsgids, 2022)



Image by SCMP Infographics. Illustrative purposes only.

It is not a strange idea that people are suggesting such drastic solutions. Reports like this are meant to make a student learn something, from assembling information, to progressing the information and eventually explain the research process. That mindset goes for anything

² Read more about Scribbr’s plagiarism checker: <https://www.scribbr.com/plagiarism-checker/>

ranging from reports, papers, math equations, writing code and more. Long story short: The consequences will become so severe in the long term, that it might make people reliant on AI to think instead: By not knowing whether a student may have sufficient knowledge to pass a subject, they may falsely pass a class and eventually get a job position that has an impact on society, only to continue this cycle of being reliant on AI and worse, people giving up studying and thinking themselves. The solution of bringing back written papers is meant to protect society and the individual.

Obviously, this was never the intention of OpenAI when they created ChatGPT. Therefore, I think this case is a perfect example for the second principle: software unintentionally causing harm.

2.1.3 Principle 1.4: Be fair and take action not to discriminate

This principle is about inclusivity: Avoiding the exclusion of groups of people or individuals and if it happens, take action to diminish it. A simple example is a website that might be useful to many people, yet only comes in a certain, non-worldwide language. That website excludes everybody that does not understand this language. This is a broad example. Taking another example from the book ***“Weapons of Math Destruction”***, written by Cathy O’Neill in 2016, would be an algorithm created by a company to filter out “bad teachers” by comparing the grades of students to an expected grade. Instead of the company’s expected outcome, some results of this were teachers manipulating the grades to pass the algorithm checks and others unjustly getting fired because of it.

2.1.3.1 *“Weapons of Math Destruction”*

This book was recommended to me by Jesús Ravelo, the teacher interviewed in the **Global Acting Group** section. I only read the summary and watched a presentation³ given by the author, but the essence of the book researches the danger of “blind trust in algorithms”, specifically focusing on the discrimination caused by them. In the presentation, the author claims to have requested to get some insight into such algorithms but did not get it. Some people refer to this as “black box algorithms”, meaning that the developers or companies do not really want to give out the source code or any other insight claiming it is all for security reasons.

Of course, it is nearly impossible to include every group, and as stated by Ms. O’Neill in the presentation: “There is no such thing as an objective algorithm, because at the very least, the person building the algorithm defines success.” But more research and being more transparent might improve this process.

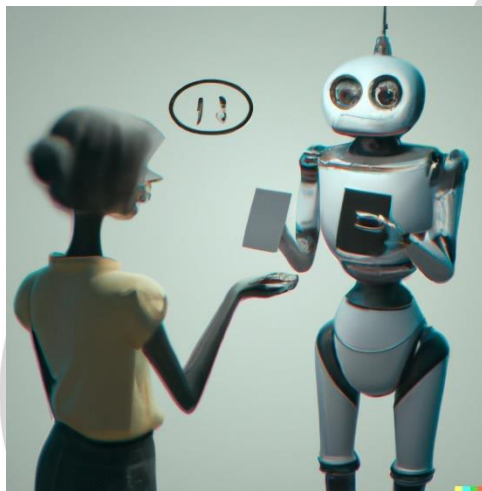
³ Weapons of Math Destruction | Cathy O’Neil | Talks at Google <https://youtu.be/TQHs8SA1gpk?t=472>

2.1.4 Principle 1.6: Respect privacy

This principle is created to protect the privacy of individuals and respect their rights. When a user signs up for an account on any website, the website usually asks for some personal information. Once signed up and having agreed to things like the terms of service, a kind of contract has formed between the user and the website/company: in return for using their service and following their guidelines, they promise to keep your data safe and secure. In this case, a user knows their information is stored by the website. But how much data do they actually need? What about the data that is tracked which the user is not aware of?

2.1.4.1 Design Ethics

It is hard to keep up with the changes in the world and knowing what is normalized nowadays. Back in the day, I would find it strange to see a social media or form website ask me for my phone number; I understand they want to send me emails, but my phone number? Are they going to send me texts about new messages? Well, not new messages, but due to authorization like two-step verification systems, they do need my phone number to send me a code that I need to enter in order to verify myself.



A robot asking a human to enter their phone number. Image generated by DALL-E.

A blog post by Carrie Sownie, writer at 99designs, highlights the importance of why ethical design is important, who it influences and more. One of the most interesting articles I have read on the topic so far. To quickly show why the principle of respecting privacy is relevant here and what consequences could be, I want to put emphasis on the following paragraph: *“Privacy issues are always a hot topic with digital design, with Alexa listening to our conversations, Google monitoring our clicks and Facebook reading our private messages. The best ethical design practice would be to develop designs that only collect personal information that is in the best interest of the users.”*, she continues to give an example, *“For example, Signal is a secure phone and messenger app specifically designed to protect its*

user's privacy. When you sign up, it doesn't ask for anything but your phone number because that's all that's necessary to start using the app. With increasing awareness and concern about privacy as a result of targeted advertising and data-driven businesses, there has been backlash and more customers are seeking out brands that respect our right to privacy." (Sownie, 2021)

2.1.4.2 Lawsuit for Facebook & TikTok

Something related to this principle that I have experienced personally is the lawsuit against the before mentioned companies. Facebook shared the information of about 87 million people with third party companies. A brief summary of the case, written by Arjun Kharpal of CNBC: *"The case was broadened to focus on Facebook's overall data-sharing practices. Plaintiffs alleged that Facebook "granted numerous third parties access to their Facebook content and information without their consent, and that Facebook failed to adequately monitor the third parties' access to, and use of, that information," according to the law firm behind the lawsuit."* (Kharpal, 2022)

The Dutch association for customers, Consumentenbond, vows to take action to allow users compensation for Facebook violating their rights.⁴ Because the odds of being part of these 87 million people are not small, I decided to sign up for the campaign as well.

Like Facebook, the Chinese owned platform TikTok also violated the rights of their younger users by sharing data without their parents or guardians' permission. Children older than 13 are allowed on the platform. According to the Consumentenbond, *"TikTok illegally collected personal data from between 1.2 million and 1.6 million Netherlands children for years and sold it for targeted ads. Part of the 37 billion dollars in profit the company made last year is therefore due to the profile information, videos and photos these children unsuspectingly shared on TikTok."* (NL Times, 2021) They demand TikTok to pay a claim of 2 billion euro's, stop the over collecting of data of children and all data gather unjustly, to be destroyed. Friends of mine with younger siblings that use the platform have signed up for the claim.⁵

The fourth principle shows that there are still active groups of people protecting the privacy of others, especially when the corporation responsible fails to do so. They can be seen as a safety net for the affected users.

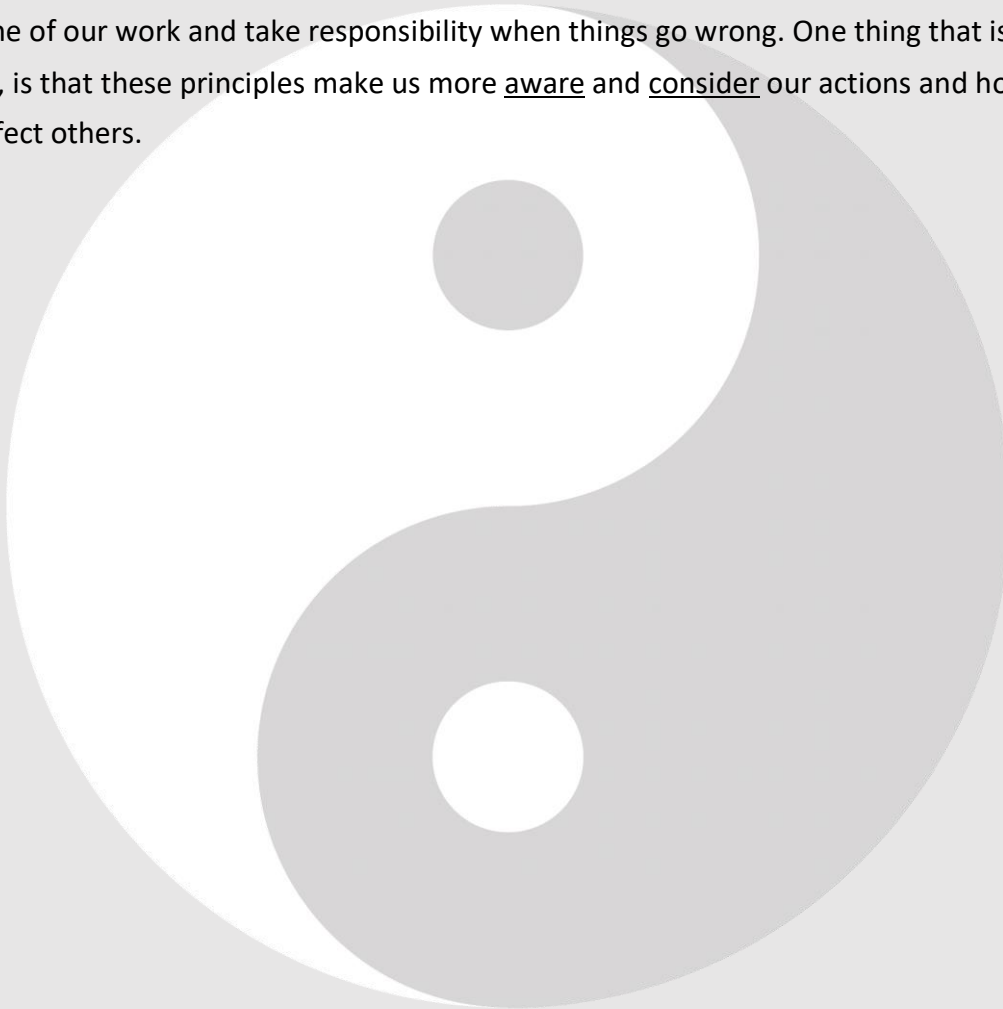
⁴ For more information about their claim against Facebook: <https://www.consumentenbond.nl/acties/facebook>

⁵ For more information about their claim against TikTok: <https://www.consumentenbond.nl/acties/claim-tiktok>

2.2 Conclusion

The first three principles discussed here have a grey area to be considered. It is impossible to please everyone when an application could potentially reach millions of people. You are bound to exclude an individual or a group of people at some point, because every user is different. Who defines what could be “harmful”? What is considered a valuable contribution to society? People should always keep asking questions and stay curious to learn more; especially with upcoming technology like “ChatGPT”.

The principles aim to guide us in our quest to diminish and possibly prevent an unethical outcome of our work and take responsibility when things go wrong. One thing that is for certain, is that these principles make us more aware and consider our actions and how they may affect others.



3. CULTURAL AWARENESS

Cultural awareness has more to do with our behaviour and respect towards people with other cultures and backgrounds. Different cultures have different ethical standards, so it starts with understanding one another before being able to make an ethical decision. In this section, I have written a summary of my interview with a teacher that is part of the Global Acting Group within Fontys, take a look at what they do for students, discuss the differences between a cultural and a personal trait, and the final section is about my own experiences while working with people from other cultures.

3.1 Global Acting Group

Teacher Jesús Ravelo is part of the team that discusses new policies and gives advice on them. The group meets regularly to keep this open mindset going and try to see it from different sides. Their advice can be seen as aid for making an ethical decision, combining the two subjects of this document. A short description of the purpose of the Global Acting Group:

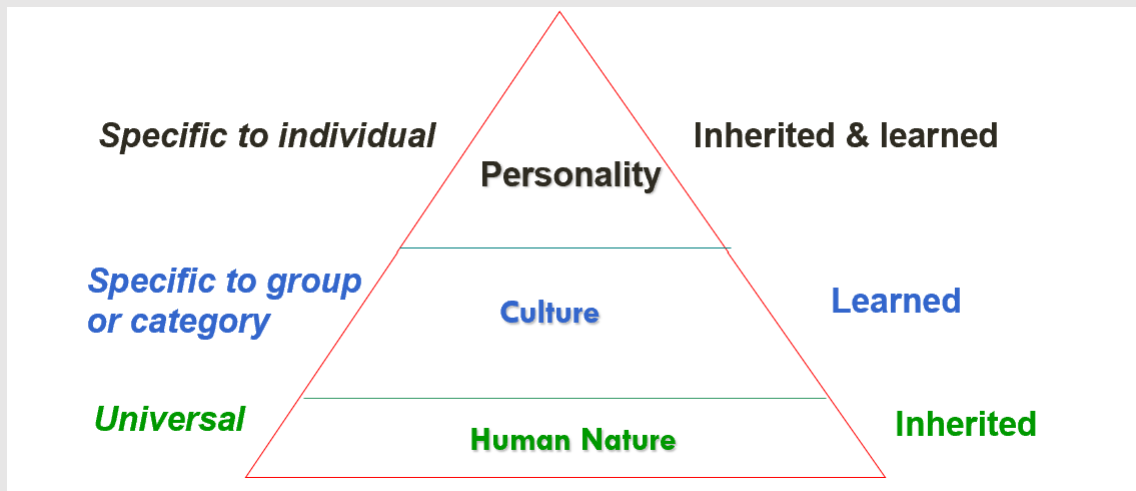
Global Acting is a development theme that Fontys introduced to help students get accustomed to cultural differences they might encounter during, but especially after their study. They have been working hard to get more international activities going for students from Fontys, like working on a project together with students from another country.

Global Acting has multiple interests: It seems the need for international experience is increasing rapidly for job offers. Next to that, having international experience also contributes to society and benefits other students and colleagues. Furthermore, they claim it has all kinds of benefits for our individual skills, like becoming more creative with our solutions and become better at problem solving.⁶

3.2 The thin line between cultural and personal traits

Mr. Ravelo explains that we should be aware that people from different countries usually are self-aware of their differences, and we should be careful of, even unintentionally, projecting a stereotype on them. Any person visiting a new country might experience some form of a culture shock. When addressing cultural differences, it should be more “in the back of our heads” when dealing with a situation; meaning that only in extreme cases it should be questioned whether something is a cultural or personal problem.

⁶ See this webpage for more information: <https://www.ambitieplanfontysict.nl/ontwikkelthemas/global-acting/>



A quick diagram depicting the differences. Retrieved from a workshop about cultural awareness.

This is also why feedback should always be based on how peers are perceived, not about their personality. Always tread carefully not to accidentally hurt someone.

3.3 Working with people from other cultures (my own experiences)

Before I took on the demand-based route within Fontys, I followed the “English Stream” course-based path where I worked with people from all over the world. In the first semester I worked with a Chinese student and in the second semester with a Russian student. In the current semester, I am working with a Muslim student. Below are three stories about the experiences I had with each of them. I also want to mention that I am often in touch with people from different cultures, as one of my hobbies includes language learning.

I became friends with the Chinese student and afterwards worked with him in a group project. I noticed that he acted reserved most of the time, but worked hard, even when the assignment was not quite clear to him yet. It turns out that he often had trouble understanding the language and eventually stopped talking when there was a misunderstanding. The language barrier quickly became visible when we worked on an application together. When I was writing down diagrams and some ‘guidelines’ to keep to (for us to understand what the other student did) he did not *seem too interested* in keeping to it and instead preferred to just create as much as possible (as long as it worked). While we ended up with a sort of functioning product, I could barely understand what he had created. From my perspective, it seemed that he was not interested while in reality he kept more to himself because of the language problem. After acknowledging this cultural problem, we started understanding each other better and I was able to help him in case of misunderstandings with other students and teachers.

The Russian student did not seem to want to work together at all; only keeping to his own idea's and going ahead with implementing them without discussing it first. The group existed out of only Dutch people, including myself, and him. He did not attend university often and claimed he had business elsewhere. So, I thought this was a cultural thing in the beginning, since I heard Russians are usually very determined, sometimes even seen as 'cold' people and want to work hard to show off results quickly. It even crossed my mind that it might be because he was a minority in the group. However, even after many attempts of trying to talk to him about his work attitude, because it affected everybody in the group, I realised this was just a personal thing. Especially after talking to people from other groups, whom also had Russian members in their groups who were the opposite of what I had experienced before.

In the current semester, I work in a group with a Muslim student, something I did not experience before. There were instances where she had to leave randomly to pray. In the beginning, this was a little frustrating as we were in the middle of our project. But I realised the only thing asked from me is to 'plan around it' to avoid further frustrations. Another instance was the time difference when she visited her family during the semester, at some point she had to quit working to eat dinner. This led to frustration for some group members, and they argued to catch up on the remaining working at another time in that case. However, I learned that it is part of their culture to eat together, and it could result in not having any dinner when a person shows up too late. I told the Muslim member that it was okay to leave and that we would look another time at how to handle a situation like this. I later explained this to my peers and we decided to just let it happen until she returned.

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