

CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: NAVIGATING EAST-WEST RELATIONS

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WORKSHOP AT THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION, FREE
UNIVERSITY OF BOZEN-BOLZANO

12-13 JUNE 2026

I am delighted to welcome you to the Faculty of Education in Brixen, South Tyrol, a unique Alpine region in northern Italy where Central European and Mediterranean cultures meet. Situated at the crossroads between north and south, South Tyrol has historically been a space of encounter - linguistic, cultural, economic, and intellectual. This inspired me to develop the idea of a workshop where I can bring together researchers and academics of diverse disciplines and angles of the world in order to both explore and practice cultural exchange.

ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTIVES

This workshop explores the role of cultural exchange in shaping human development and East–West relations in the 21st century. It examines contemporary Middle Eastern contexts and their wider global interconnections through the critical lenses of postcolonial and decolonial theories, interrogating how historical power asymmetries between the West and the Middle East continue to shape cultural interactions, modes of knowledge production, development trajectories, and collective identities.

A postcolonial perspective reveals how the East–West relationship has often been structured by Orientalist discourses that portray the Middle East as dependent on Western intervention for cultural, moral, or development issues. In this framing, cultural exchange becomes a site of asymmetrical knowledge production, where the West is positioned as the source of value and the East as the recipient.

A decolonial perspective extends aspects of postcolonial theory by actively decentering Western epistemologies and foregrounding local knowledge production, agency, and institutional structures. It seeks not only to dismantle inherited power hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies but also to enable the emergence of autonomous modes of identity, self-representation, and intellectual production. In doing so, it affirms the capacity of communities in this region to define development and cultural transformation on their own terms.

Since the 1990s, the region has acquired increasing international significance, marked by growing pluralism and cosmopolitanism. Specific case studies can shed new light on its role within broader transnational and global dynamics. Rather than positioning identity and culture in opposition to westernised modernity, this perspective highlights evolving social formations and new realities, particularly in relation to migration and labour, changing gender roles and questions of justice, cultural and educational exchanges, and the social and environmental sustainability of urban growth. In light of this approach, this workshop aims to bring together scholars working across diverse regional contexts to explore shared challenges, opportunities, and future trajectories. In particular, we seek to examine how historical and contemporary East–West relations shape power dynamics both vertically (between states and institutions) and horizontally (across social and cultural fields), as well as agency and processes of knowledge production.

Through this dialogue, the workshop seeks to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of cultural exchange as a dynamic field in which power, knowledge, and social transformation are continuously negotiated.

The full Call For Papers is available [here](#).

ORGANISATION & SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE



Initiator and Organiser of the workshop

Annemarie Profanter is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy. Her investigation of comparative educational practices and systems in Pakistan, Oman, and Saudi Arabia and her application of those results to issues of integration and intercultural settings. Her interest in women's professional identity formation segued into a broader interest in women's cultural identity formation in the Gulf due to my exposure in a segregated educational setting. Some representative examples of the institutes she has worked as a Visiting Professor in the Education Department of a "City University of Science and Information Technology", Peshawar City, Pakistan, "Dhofar University", Salalah, Sultanate of Oman, "Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University" in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<http://annemarieprofanter.com/>

Ryan Cate Gibson, Dr., is co-founder and CEO of Holistic Performance Group and a scholar-practitioner working at the intersection of cultural exchange, human development, and emotionally intelligent learning. For more than fifteen years she has collaborated with the University of Alabama in Huntsville across Business, Arts & Sciences, and Nursing to design interdisciplinary programs linking neuroscience, education, and community wellbeing. Her work explores how relational learning environments foster resilience, adaptability, and meaningful cross-cultural understanding in the 21st century.



Elena Maestri is a Ph.D, Tenured Researcher and Professor of History and Institutions of the Muslim World at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) of Milano (Italy). Her research has been focused on several key areas, including the modern-contemporary history of Arabia, gender issues and Islam, development and cooperation in the Arab Gulf countries, old and new media in the Arab-Muslim world. She has authored and co-authored numerous articles, book chapters, and books in both Italian and English. The books *Arab Women and the Media in Changing Landscapes*, and *Migration and Integration Challenges of Muslim Immigrants in Europe* were co-authored and co-edited with Annemarie Profanter and were published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017 and 2021 respectively. In 2019, she published *The Arabian City and its Territory. Historical Identity and Heritage Issues* (EDUCatt, Milano, 2019). Her first volume in Italian, *La regione del Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Sviluppo e sicurezza umana in Arabia*, was published in 2009 by FrancoAngeli.

Gennaro Errichiello is Assistant Professor in Social Development and Policy at Habib University, Karachi. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Loughborough University, an MA in Global Migration from Swansea University, and a degree in Political Science with a focus on the Middle East from University of Naples "L'Orientale". His research examines South-South migration, particularly in the Gulf region, migration governance, and everyday integration. He has published in leading peer-reviewed journals, edited a volume on Covid-19, and published chapters in edited volumes, and presented at international conferences. He currently leads the Habib University-funded project Narratives of Everyday Integration in the City (NEIC).



Information Social Gathering

In the Heart of the UNESCO Landscape

Saturday, 13 June 2026

As a final get together, I thought of something very special for you all: Thousands of tourists travel around the world to visit the UNESCO world natural heritage area of Villnöss. I would like to take you to this very special places high up in the mountains as a way to conclude our discussions and intensive workshop days. Therefore I organized a spezial Social Gathering on Saturday, 13 June 2026.

During this social gathering, we will visit two traditional mountain huts: the Gschnagenhardt Alm in Funes, operated by the Profanter family, and a mountain hut located at 1,996 metres above sea level in the heart of the Puez–Odle Nature Reserve. The Gschnagenhardt Alm is beautifully situated along the renowned Munkelweg trail at the foot of the Odle mountain range. It is a beloved hiking destination and an inviting place to pause, enjoy the landscape, and experience authentic South Tyrolean cuisine. Here, we will gather for a social dinner in a relaxed alpine setting.



[Website „Gschnagenhardt Alm“](#)



[Website „Geisler Alm“](#)

The second hut, “Geisleralm”, is surrounded by peaceful natural scenery and offers a breathtaking 360° panoramic view of the majestic peaks of the Odle mountain range and the Val di Funes valley. Considered one of South Tyrol’s most beautiful mountain venues, it provides a welcoming atmosphere for a relaxing pause with coffee and home-made cake, either on the sunny terrace or in one of the traditional South Tyrolean lounges (“Stube”).

Both huts are known for their genuine regional specialties, carefully prepared dishes, and warm hospitality, offering an ideal setting for informal exchange amidst one of South Tyrol’s most remarkable natural environments.

This social gathering will take place in the Dolomites, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, renowned for their breathtaking landscapes and unique geological significance. Since 2009, they have been recognized alongside iconic places like the Grand Canyon and the Great Barrier Reef. Their striking rock formations, such as the Odle Peaks and Mount Putia, tell a story of millions of years of Earth's history—making the region not only a place of beauty, but also a shared heritage to be preserved for future generations. In this remarkable setting, the social gathering offers a unique opportunity to encounter the natural environment that forms part of the global heritage of humanity, while continuing conversations in an inspiring and informal atmosphere.

Explore the UNESCO World Natural Heritage



Important Note

Due to limited transportation permits (taxis are granted only a restricted number of authorizations per day), it is unfortunately not possible to both attend the social get together and depart on Saturday. Participants leaving on Saturday, 13 June 2026, will therefore not be able to join the social gathering and kindly ask you to take this into account and let me know if you plan to depart earlier.

What to bring:

- A warm jacket (mountain weather can change quickly)
- Sturdy walking shoes
- Sun protection (hat, sunglasses, sunscreen)

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I look forward to welcoming you at the Faculty of
Education in Brixen and wish you a smooth and
pleasant journey!

Annemarie Profanter