In the theoretical framework, the first principle for the study of identity in interaction is the ‘situatedness’ principle, which highlights the fact that all identity work takes place in a situated context. The research questions I seek to answer in this chapter are:

- What identity positionings does the situated context of Soliya offer participants?
- What factors influence these positionings?

I ask these questions not because these are the only identity positionings available to the participants, nor do I wish to imply that they remain static, essentialised identities – but rather to acknowledge that they may have an influence on the interactions that take place within that site.

In order to answer these questions, I adopt the concept of ‘epistechnical system’ (Williamson, 2013). Developed in the field of educational technology, the term refers to the fusion and binding of technology and knowledge in curricular configurations. Williamson (2013) observes that like all technological and educational systems, epistchnical systems are socially shaped and socially shaping, that is they are not neutral, but rather “socially constructed and historically contingent” (p. 40), intentionally designed products which serve to influence and shape thought and action.

The Soliya Connect Program can be considered as an epistchnical system for it explicitly aims to influence thought and action. Adopting this lens allows me to identify the factors which influence the available identity positionings, and also to embrace a critical understanding of the context.
Williamson’s (2013) framework is a critical approach to the study of educational technology. Published in the volume the *Politics of Education and Technology*, he offers a method which facilitates interpretation on different levels. In order to understand educational technology in relation to its connections to a larger society, he argues that political and sociological issues need to be introduced into the narrative. Selwyn and Facer (2013) argue that educational technology should be seen as a site of negotiation and struggle between different actors, which include the designers and developers of new tools and curricula, consultants, funders and advocates, as well as those whom the educational projects are addressing, their families and communities. It needs to be explored on a ‘macro’ level of social structure of society as well as the microlevel of the individual and the learning context.

In attempting to take a critical stance, I thus look at the politics embodied in the epistotechnical system I am studying, the Soliya Connect Program, by asking what authority and expertise has contributed to its design? “What politics and values and what kinds of prospective identities, actions, and forms of ‘learning’ are to be shaped and sculpted” (Williamson, 2013, p. 40) through this system? I will seek to answer these questions first of all by analysing the website and documentation produced and published by Soliya in order to offer a rich description of the organisation behind the programme and its development, and seek to identify contradictions and tensions inherent in the programme.

### 5.1. Soliya as an epistotechnical system

The Soliya Connect Program can be considered as an epistotechnical system because it seeks to transform individuals, not by making them subscribe to a particular point of view, but by offering them “the opportunity to genuinely re-examine and analyse pre-existing opinions and beliefs in a space in which transformation and reconsideration of existing views is possible” (Soliya, 2010, p. 6). The declared aim is to empower participants and develop their sense of responsibility in contributing to making a more positive relationship between ‘Western societies’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’ by seeking to foster
greater understanding for other perspectives on issues which are seen to be divisive, and which education has often chosen to ignore. At the same time, the project also claims to offer participants the possibility to develop ‘21st century skills’, including cross-cultural communication, media literacy, and critical thinking (see Figure 5.1 below).

Figure 5.1. Screenshot of Soliya website: what we do

Looking at ‘Who we are’ on Soliya’s website, the organisation defines itself as:

“a dynamic network of staff, university partners and students, volunteer facilitators, trainers and coaches, Soliya Fellows and civil society partners, along with a dedicated Board of Directors, advisors and funders.

1. The website has been updated since the study was carried out. Reproduced with kind permissions from © Soliya.
Our team represents thought leaders, experienced practitioners and emerging young activists in the fields of new media and technology, social entrepreneurship, conflict resolution, advocacy and international affairs”.

The website has a series of slides with large photos of individuals which appear on the left hand side – changing to reflect a young, culturally diverse community, located in a range of locations, some of them holding media tools such as video cameras. This imagery and text reinforce its definition of itself as a diverse, global community (the name, role and location of each person appears with their photo) engaged in adventure and “committed to a brighter tomorrow” in a world which is “defined by greater cross-cultural cooperation and compassion” (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Soliya website: who we are

2. Reproduced with kind permissions from © Soliya.
The buttons on the right hand side of the page (Donate Now, Get Involved, Subscribe) also serve to identify Soliya\(^3\) as a non-profit organisation which seeks donations from funding bodies and the involvement and generation of a community or network of people who subscribe to the activities and ideals of Soliya.

On the website, there is no specification of the geographical location of Soliya as an organisation. It is presented very much as a network of people, with different levels of involvement and some form of hierarchy. Soliya has a board of directors and staff members, who are split into an executive team, and staff members. Photos and bios of board and staff members are present on the site, and from some of the biographies it is possible to infer where they are located, some in the US or Egypt, but not all. The staff team represents a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and many members with experience of living and/or studying abroad. Soliya’s network members are the University partners, now listing over 100 across much of the world, and the Soliya Network of alumni; people who participated in Soliya as part of their university studies and some of whom have continued to collaborate as volunteer facilitators. The Soliya Connect Program can be seen to embody what Williamson (2013) defines as “networked cosmopolitanism”, that is, “a way of thinking about the future that is infused with normative ideas about the cosmopolitan potential of networks” which blends cosmopolitan principles of autonomy and self-responsibility with network notions of connectivity “to motivate a particular style of belonging in the (imagined) future of a globalised society” (p. 43).

5.2. Problems and solutions

The development of an epistotechnical system entails the construction of an ‘imagined future’ for young people (Williamson, 2013, p.43), and curriculum developers construct consensus and legitimacy by fashioning particular

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3. The name Soliya, as reported on the website, “integrates the Latin word for sun, sol, and an ancient Arabic word for light, iya (িযাযা). The word ‘iya’ is rare, but can be found in the Mu’allaqat, or The Hanging Poems, a collection of renowned pre-Islamic poems that hang on the Ka’aba. The name reflects our aim to bridge divides and shed light on cultural differences that too often seem inevitable and intractable”.

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problems to which they propose a solution. The main problem the Soliya developers identify is the negative approach to difference which characterises the relationship between ‘Western’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’ and the widespread perception of an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’, which responses to 9/11 seemed to invoke. As they write on their website:

“We believe that the fundamental challenge is to shift the dominant paradigm for how our societies resolve differences from an approach defined by confrontation & coercion to one defined by cooperation & compassion. This need is particularly acute in relations between Western and predominantly Muslim societies. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and trillions of dollars spent since the turn of the century in what many see as an inevitable ‘Clash of Civilizations’”.

Similar concerns have also been recognised in the field of foreign language education, with a wide range of publications on the role of language in the public sphere and foreign language teaching since 9/11. For example, from the US perspective, Heidi Byrnes (2004) wrote:

“A post 9/11 world affords the language profession a much-needed opportunity to revise its notions of the role of language in the public sphere. For no cultural and linguistic world have the events of 9/11 and its aftermath affected views of ‘the other’ more dramatically than for the Arabic speaking world, often lumped together with the Islamic world, often lumped together with uncivilized societies and terrorism” (p. 267).

A further problem Soliya identifies is that ‘traditional’ education and media are not addressing the problem effectively. The problem with the media has been identified in research carried out on stereotyping, according to which inaccurate beliefs of media stereotypes of particular groups are reinforced in viewers that have had little direct contact with these groups (see Argo, Idriss, & Fancy, 4. The original text and webpage can no longer be found.
Further research has found that emotion plays a more central role in forming our judgements, worldviews, and values than cognitive reasoning. The Soliya website states that media coverage is serving to polarise groups rather than bring them together, while social media have given individuals the power to influence increasing numbers of people. That is, ‘influencers’ can have expansively destructive impacts, for example the pastor in Florida who burnt the Quran in 2011, which led to protests in Afghanistan where 20 people were killed⁶ or more recently ISIS strategists who adeptly used social media to recruit fighters⁷. In face of this, Soliya seeks to create a generation of ‘influencers’ who will have a positive impact⁸, as I will discuss in the following section.

### 5.3. Transportable and imagined identities

As the Soliya Connect Program is based on theories of conflict transformation and intergroup relations, it makes relevant the transportable identity categories of the broad social groups involved in this ‘conflict’: ‘Western societies’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’⁹. This framing can be seen to represent one of the tensions of this curriculum, as in order to address problematic intergroup relations, it is necessary to define the groups. The use of such broad social group labels is problematic as it indexes homogeneity and ignores the political, religious, economic, social, and demographic heterogeneity within these groups. It is also strategic, for problematising these labels and the language used to talk about the ‘other’ is part of the Soliya Connect Program activities. One of the questions I explore in the following chapters is whether more heterogeneous identities emerge within the interactions of the dialogue group (as indeed the programme intends) or if the participants stick to these broad social group labels.

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5. A link to this study is published on their website


7. [https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/](https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/)

8. The original text and webpage can no longer be found.

9. Soliya counterposes ‘Western societies’, using a broad geographic term, with ‘predominantly Muslim societies’, a term which defines a group on the basis of religion rather than geography, at times also using the phrase ‘predominantly Arab and/or Muslim societies’.
As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the notion of imagined identities is also a key construct in language learning. The notion of imagination as suggested by Anderson (1991) and developed by Wenger (1998) as regards communities of practice has been adopted by Norton (2000/2013), who argues that it is a way for learners to appropriate meanings and create new identities, transcending their immediate environment. Language learners may invest in those who provide them with access to their imagined communities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), but it is not just language learning contexts, for all types of educational environments, from the classroom to the institution (Kanno, 2003), the offline to the online, the formal to the non-formal, have visions for their students’ futures.

The imagined future that Soliya constructs in its narrative is one of “greater peace and prosperity for the next generation”, as reported on their website. In their view, this can be achieved by changing how societies approach difference, for instance by preparing a generation of ‘influencers’, who can address emerging tensions and create a positive interdependence capable of addressing future challenges. The solution they propose to the problem of intergroup relations is a model of education and media literacy which can create this new generation who are committed to “cooperative and compassionate approaches to difference”. The institutionally defined imagined identity is thus that of an ‘influencer’, somebody who can use the networking power of new media technologies to change societies. Becoming involved with Soliya means joining “a global community of people committed to a brighter tomorrow” (website: Get Involved tab) and is a way into this global network, which is represented visually on the Soliya website through the gallery of photos of individuals belonging to the Soliya community as seen in Figure 5.2 above. Whether this imagined identity is shared or indexed by the participants themselves through their interactions shall also be explored in this study.

The prospective view offered by Soliya, its self-definition as a network, echoes many characteristics of the modern identity evoked in Williamson’s (2013)
‘networked cosmopolitanism’, which is “embodied in talk about autonomy, self-responsibility, respect for diversity and difference, and participation and collaboration in communities, with a focus on the creation of a ‘good’ or ‘ethical’ future” (p. 46). What we identify as a ‘good’ future needs defining though.

Martha Nussbaum (1996), the well-known American philosopher and theorist of global justice, defined cosmopolitanism as offering one’s principal loyalty “to the moral community made up by the humanity of all beings” (p. 7). Camicia and Franklin (2010) build on her definition and identify two strands of cosmopolitan discourse, which communicate two different visions for community. The first, ‘neoliberal cosmopolitanism’, defines global citizens as a community of self-starting entrepreneurs who function in terms of a market rationale. The second, ‘democratic cosmopolitanism’, defines global citizens as a community of diverse individuals with a mindset oriented towards cultural representation, human rights, and social justice.

We find traces of both discourses in Soliya’s imagined future of ‘greater peace and prosperity’ described above. These discourses also appear in the goals of the Soliya curriculum, as defined on their website. The first set of goals specified on the website are in line with this form of democratic cosmopolitanism which is concerned with cultural representation:

“Establish a deeper understanding for the perspectives of others around the world on important socio-political issues and why they feel the way they do”.

The second set of goals, with an emphasis on skills, hints at the neoliberal discourse which has permeated education policy and focusses on skills-sets which are required for the 21st century workplace:

“Develop ‘21st century skills’ such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and media literacy skills”.

12. The original text and webpage can no longer be found.
Chapter 5

As Rose (2009) writes, the philosophy behind 21st century skills is an economic one, and the civic, social, and ethical reasons for developing ‘cross-cultural communication skills’ and ‘critical thinking’ are lost sight of, as they are generally expressed in terms of workplace effectiveness (as in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills). In Chapter 8, I explore if the participants evoke either of these ‘networked cosmopolitan’ identities as their imagined identities in their interactions.

5.4. Tensions and contradictions in the Soliya Connect Program

5.4.1. Western aims and model?

The goals of the Connect Program may resonate well with educators who believe that they should aim to challenge stereotypes and foster intercultural awareness and understanding in learners, who see their role not as transmitting knowledge but rather sowing the seeds of doubt in students to enable them to become critical thinkers. Yet do these goals reflect only the ‘Western’ educational ideals of the programme’s developers, and is there a risk that these are imposed on Soliya’s partners in education?

Maha Bali (2013), whose PhD thesis explores critical thinking in an American liberal arts university in Egypt – and which looks at the Soliya Connect Program as one of several projects adopted to enhance this, has addressed this issue. Critical thinking, as pointed out by Bali (2013, p. 28), is considered by many to be a Western-influenced educational ideal which opposes Arab and Muslim cultural values (Cook, 1999). For example, critical thinking encourages people to accommodate various perspectives and see several truths as equally viable, whilst Islam is tolerant of different perspectives but does not consider them all to be equally valid, and claims a single universal truth (Cook, 1999). However, she points out that other scholars (Nurullah, 2006; Said, 2004) have contrasted

this view of Islam, arguing that the concept of ‘ijtihad’ (which applies critical and creative thinking to new situations in Islamic law) is fundamental in interpreting Islam and applying Islamic law (sharia), and can result in multiple divergent but equally valid interpretations (Bali, 2013, pp. 28-29). It has been argued that today there is a lack of critical thinking in Islamic scholars and their followers, Bali (2013) continues, and that this process of ‘ijtihad’ has given way to ‘taqlid’ (or blind emulation), despite encouragement for critical reflection and creative thinking in the Quran and Sunnah (Nurullah, 2006). I am in no position to make judgements on this issue for it goes well beyond the aims of this thesis. Furthermore, I am a ‘Western’ scholar working in Europe with very limited knowledge of Islam. However, I would agree with Bali who points out that critical thinking is not necessarily alive and kicking across the United States or in Europe.14

A further issue is the willingness and ability of participants to engage in this dialogic type of communication. Bali (2014) argues that the dialogic model privileges students who are familiar with interactive classrooms, such as Western students. Whilst this may be the case for students from some Western, Anglophone contexts, I would argue that many European students in higher education are not familiar with interactive, dialogic classes, for the predominant pedagogic model remains the transmission of knowledge through lectures (European Commission, 2013).

5.4.2. The language issue

As is clear from the information provided thus far, the Soliya Connect Program was not developed as an English language programme, but it has been adopted in advanced English language courses in various institutes in Europe (including my own context, the University of Padova, Italy) and the Middle East. The rationale for this is that it is a form of experiential learning which integrates content and language use. As well as being an opportunity for developing their English language, and also acquiring knowledge about issues which affect

the relationship between ‘Western societies’ and the ‘predominantly Muslim societies’, the Soliya Connect Program allows participants to develop new online literacies (Guth & Helm, 2010), such as communicating in synchronous online video, using text and audio chat simultaneously, multi-tasking, and video production skills.

However, the fact that English is the language of communication between participants means that about half of the participants are expressing themselves in their second, possibly third, fourth (or more) language, on controversial and emotional issues. This creates power inequalities and introduces issues of cultural and linguistic capital, as Bali (2013, 2014) argues, for the American participants who are already in many respects the ‘dominant’ side. Also, the participants with better English and more exposure to the American culture find it easier to have a conversation. While having an Arabic-speaking facilitator can help, when the Arabic facilitators themselves are less fluent in English the situation can be exacerbated, Bali (2013) maintains. The choice of English can be seen to reflect a global need for a shared language in order for intercultural dialogue to take place, but this creates inequalities in power relations:

“We [the minorities] and you [the dominant] do not talk the same language. When we talk to you we use your language: the language of your experience and of your theories. We try to use it to communicate our world of experience. But since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion. We cannot talk to you in our language because you do not understand it” (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, p. 575, quoted in Bali & Sharma, 2014, n.p.).

Soliya has acknowledged this to a certain extent in the facilitation training by advising facilitators to support those who are not so fluent in English by summarising conversations in text chat, and addressing the language issue with some activities which are intended to raise awareness of the language issue.
This again is a tension and contradiction in Soliya. Alternative possibilities could be making Arabic the main language of the programme, and having the support of translators. This, however, clashes with the ‘hinted at’ neoliberal discourse and ‘soft sell’ of the Soliya Connect Program. Furthermore, as the programme has been increasing, the opportunity to use and improve their English is a motivation for many of the students in the ‘predominantly Muslim world’ to participate in Soliya Connect Program, as witnessed by the number of students in predominantly Muslim countries taking part in the Soliya Connect Program as part of their English courses\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{15} Information received from Soliya about established partnerships.