

19 Intercultural competence for youth workers

Daniel Dixon¹ and Onur Tahmaz²

Abstract

Intercultural Competence for Youth workers (ICY)³ was a project co-funded by the European Union Erasmus+ programme that ran for 14 months, from spring 2019 to spring 2020, and involved four organisations from Finland, Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Engaging youth workers⁴ and young people with fewer opportunities, the project helped youth workers improve their intercultural ability to create places – particularly in the context of sports activities – where young people feel safe, accepted, and not discriminated against. In the context of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) initiative, the partners developed a ‘trial run’ which included an online facilitated dialogue session to test the pedagogy and process of VE, as well as get feedback from the youth involved.

Keywords: virtual exchange, youth work, intercultural awareness, sport, social inclusion.

1. Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades, Telde, Spain; daniel.dixon@acceso.org; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5729-3401>

2. Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades, Telde, Spain; onur.tahmaz@acceso.org; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4662-4604>

3. <https://icyerasmus.squarespace.com/>

4. ‘Youth worker’ is used as an umbrella term and comprises the various figures – trainers, instructors, and leaders – engaged in activities with youth.

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1. Context

The ICY project's aim was to improve social inclusion in youth groups by training youth workers and coaches in intercultural competence.

The consortium of partners was made up of:

- HNMKY, (YMCA Helsinki) Finland⁵;
- Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades (Spain)⁶;
- ChangeMakerZ, the Netherlands⁷; and
- KSC City Pirates, Belgium⁸.

The professionals involved were football coaches, youth workers, trainers, facilitators, teachers, and educators. The objective was for them to share and learn from each other, exploring ways to improve intercultural competence within their organisations and beyond. The young people involved in the project were generally those with fewer opportunities, in other words from low socioeconomic and/or migrant backgrounds, unemployed, suffering from mental illness, or living in an outermost region of the EU. Most participants had found connection to their community and a safe space through sport and non-formal education, and due to the multicultural aspect of the communities involved, supporting young people and youth workers to gain effective intercultural competence skills was, and remains, a priority for the four organisations within the consortium.

In May 2018, the European Commission put forward proposals for the new EU Youth Strategy⁹. One of the main areas of further development was social inclusion. Due to the economic crisis, social exclusion among young people had

5. <https://www.hnmky.fi/>

6. <https://www.aceso.org/>

7. <https://www.facebook.com/teamchangemakerz/>

8. <https://www.citypirates.be/>

9. https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

increased. The ICY project used sports and physical education in youth work to increase inclusion and acceptance of diversity. The core goal of the project was to increase social inclusion and solidarity in the partner organisations' youth groups by training the youth workers in inclusive methods and intercultural competence. Realising the potential of using physical education in youth work as a method of increasing social inclusion and intercultural awareness was a key goal for the partner organisations. These goals are very much in line with the objectives mentioned in the Youth Strategy proposal for the years 2019-2027. However, although sports clubs, after school programmes, and other non-formal groups, especially those using physical education in their activities, are often considered as highly effective integrators and inclusive environments for youth, they are not free from racism and discrimination ([European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010](#)). If the youth workers, instructors, trainers, and leaders are not culturally competent leaders, sports and youth clubs can be places of exclusion and racism.

The ICY project helped youth workers improve their intercultural ability to create places where young people feel safe, accepted, and not discriminated against. The objective of ICY was to share best practices to increase social inclusion in youth groups. The project partners were youth organisations that use physical activities partly or fully. Increasing social inclusion and combatting discrimination are core values of each partner organisation, but all partners also had their own strengths. The organisations were chosen from culturally distinct areas and each provided different types of activities for youth. Throughout/during the project, the partner organisations and their instructors shared their experiences, learnt methods from each other, and exchanged best practices to facilitate social inclusion. These methods supported the youth workers in their daily work by helping them deal with racism and discrimination in their groups in a constructive way. As the youth workers' intercultural competence grew, they were more equipped to promote acceptance of diversity and cultural awareness in their groups.

The partner organisations aimed to enable inclusion by giving the youth workers the tools to develop their intercultural competence. To find the best

tools (i.e. methods and activities), the partners exchanged their best practices in in-person short term training events (three job shadowing rounds and one intercultural competence training). In the intercultural competence training, the instructors learnt from one another both the theoretical basis of facilitating social inclusion and practical activity ideas that can be used to promote acceptance and inclusiveness. In job shadowing events, the partners observed the methods, habits, and actions of the instructors in the host organisations. It is important to get an outside observer to point out and learn from our tacit knowledge, to verbalise it, and to transfer these learnt methods into different contexts. ICY was a fantastic opportunity to focus on finding these activities and actions that improve the intercultural competence of instructors and increase social inclusion in the youth groups as well as to collect and test them in culturally different environments. Ultimately, it is not only the instructors but the young people in their groups who benefit from these culturally sensitive instruction methods. These methods were recorded and tested in different contexts, and are now available in tool kit format¹⁰.

During the project, the partners became aware of the E+VE initiative and with the support of UNICollaboration, developed a ‘trial run’ to test the pedagogy and process of VE, as well as get feedback from the youth involved. This ‘project within a project’ involved young people that had participated in the ICY activities.

The consortium saw the importance of keeping the momentum going between young people and youth workers that had been involved in the physical activities, and because the project was about intercultural competence, integrating E+VE seemed to meet its needs and goals. The idea was that eight young people taking part in the project would work on an asynchronous activity and also meet online for a dialogue session on the topic of intercultural competence. They would be supported in this activity by trained E+VE dialogue facilitators so they could engage on a deeper level about the topic.

10. <https://icyerasmus.squarespace.com/mission-index-impact>

2. Aims and description of the project

This was a ‘trial run’ for the consortium, and its main aim was to offer a way for the young people that were connected to ICY to continue learning from each other in their journey of developing intercultural competence. The work of the four organisations is mainly with physical activities, so this was also a great opportunity to test new ways of working with young people and of supporting intercultural competence development, and to see how virtual activities can complement in-person activities.

Two young people from each partner organisation (Finland, Spain, Netherlands, and Belgium), who had already met before in various transnational in-person activities, were chosen to take part. There was an asynchronous activity which involved a desk review of the ICY tool kit¹¹ that was designed as an output of the project, and an online facilitated dialogue session. The eight young people met online with two Erasmus+ dialogue facilitators and took part in various activities which had been planned beforehand by the facilitators at UNICollaboration and the consortium.

3. Nuts and bolts

The young people had met throughout the project in various activities and training events and took part in activities together. They then met online in a group of eight to work with the dialogue facilitators, who elicited self-group awareness and understanding by providing a safe and effective learning environment where participants could begin to engage in effective cross-cultural dialogue online. The eight participants involved were all inspired to take the skills and understanding beyond their participation in this session and continue to engage in activities, two also planning to train to become dialogue facilitators themselves.

11. https://issuu.com/acsesogc/docs/icy_toolkit_english__1_

The young people were very motivated to do this online activity and to continue with the dialogue they had started during the physical mobilities. To prepare, they met with their youth workers to reflect on what they had learnt during the project's mobilities. The consortium met with the facilitation team at UNICollaboration and explained what the project entailed, the goals and outcomes, and the UNICollaboration team then designed a session plan based on intercultural dialogue and assumptions.

The session, which took place on the Zoom video-conferencing platform, started with a warm-up and an icebreaker activity. Participants were first of all engaged in an activity where the group analysed an image of 'The Culture Iceberg' and reflected on the visible and hidden aspects of culture.

In the second main activity, they reflected on aspects of their own identity. The purpose of the activity was to explore the multiple aspects of participants' identities and how different identities are foregrounded in relation to the groups and contexts they may find themselves in.

With the support of facilitators, participants reflected on feelings related to their identities and how they may feel when their identity is threatened, or when they are identified only in relation to one aspect of their identity. According to the feedback from the young people, it was a very powerful exercise. The session finished with a time for reflection on what they had learnt.

The dialogue session was led in English and the young people with a lower proficiency level were supported by their peers; the facilitators also kept a running 'chat box' in the Zoom platform of what was being discussed. This allowed the participants to use online translation tools such as Google Translate for anything they did not fully understand, or to prepare their response to a question. This worked very well and the participants reported how they were surprised with how much they were able to achieve in a second language. The facilitators encouraged the whole group to give themselves a round of applause at the end for all working in a language other than their own.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

The group leaders met the participants in their own youth/sports centres following the session and discussed it with the participants. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. They saw the value of connecting online and staying in contact with friends from other countries, in addition to meeting physically.

“It was great to see the people we met in Amsterdam again, and I thought talking online would be hard but it was actually really nice” (VE participant, Spain).

“I wasn’t very nervous because I knew my friends already, but I was still a bit worried because my English is not good. It wasn’t difficult though, the session was relaxed and everyone told me I was good at speaking” (VE participant, Belgium).

“I loved this project, and the VE was a great addition to it. I have since taken part in three more [Transnational Exchange Projects (TEPs)] and begin training to become a dialogue facilitator later this year. Recently, I wondered what we would do because of the pandemic, but I am amazed with how many great opportunities I have found online” (VE participant, Spain).

5. Lessons learnt and future plans

The ICY project offered an opportunity to explore the potential of a blended model whereby following the last transnational training visit, some participants continued their engagement online. The results were extremely positive. Participants felt engaged, re-inspired, and more connected with their peers all around Europe. From the consortium’s standpoint, VE was simple to arrange: people used their mobile phones or laptops, and the whole process took only a few hours while providing meaningful interaction for participants. In our project, the exchange was supported by UNICollaboration in the context of E+VE to

cover the topics of cultural competence and impact of cultural identity in youth work.

There is great potential in VEs both as a supportive activity (before and after transnational exchanges) and as a stand-alone learning opportunity. For some individuals, travel is not always possible due to a variety of reasons (physical, financial, family), but this should not mean that they cannot take part in multinational virtual learning events.

As organisers, we saw this project as a ‘trial run’. It was added as an activity to an existing project, and only included one facilitated dialogue session, but things have certainly moved on since then.

Based on our experience from this trial exchange, and the ICY consortium’s involvement in E+VE activities, we have gone on to deliver more ‘robust’ TEPs. These include a selection of asynchronous resources and activities (readings, short videos, forum discussions) as well as collaborative tasks in which participants from different organisations work together to produce an outcome. In addition, we have included more online facilitated dialogue sessions as these allow the participants to find their feet and delve more deeply into the topics addressed as well as to get to know one another better. With the ICY consortium, the participants were already familiar with each other, but this is not always the case. Synchronous activities should be complemented with asynchronous activities to continue with engagement of the topic outside of the dialogue sessions, bringing more value and learning opportunities.

Since this project, we have also experienced many more challenges working with young people due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Through this ‘trial run’ we became much more aware of how beneficial the possibilities of delivering and supporting youth work activities online could be.

Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades, one of the consortium members of the ICY project, designed, planned, and implemented two large TEPs during this period.

- **Fight fakes, think critically:** a four week TEP that included 53 young people from eight organisations in Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Hungary. Content was provided in the form of an e-book written for this project. Asynchronous activities required participants to engage with and reflect on the content which related to elections and referendums, the climate crisis, and vaccinations. Two facilitated dialogue sessions were organised: one at the beginning of the exchange for participants to get to know one another and their different contexts, and a second one to reflect on and discuss the content of the e-book. This project is part of a larger project application that will also include a youth worker training mobility, and a youth exchange mobility.
- **CSTEP – critical thinking:** a four week cross-sectoral TEP about critical thinking which included 13 organisations, one youth theatre group, two universities, one high school, one vocational school, and eight youth organisations. These organisations were from Spain, France, Croatia, Turkey, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal, and the project involved 89 young people. Asynchronous content was delivered each week using the TED-ED platform and this content formed the basis of weekly online facilitated dialogue sessions supported by E+VE facilitators.

The participants in these TEPs received E+VE badges as recognition of their participation, which reports the acquisition of the following skills:

- digital competence;
- intercultural competence;
- openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views, and practices; and
- cooperation skills.

Although the concept of open online badges is relatively new to the participants, they are encouraged to open LinkedIn accounts and start displaying their

achievements there in preparation for joining the workforce. They also use EuroPass CVs and can display their new digital badges there along with their other experiences, qualifications, and achievements.

These projects have supported youth work activities, allowing them to continue and keep young people engaged and active during trying times. They have also highlighted different models and possibilities for youth work for consortium members, and the journey continues.

We also plan to utilise VE in blended mobility programmes as soon as mobility is possible again. Facilitated dialogue and asynchronous tasks will be used as a pre-departure activity before a youth exchange mobility begins to allow the participants to engage with each other before the physical mobility. This will allow them to break the ice and start delving into the theme of the project. During the mobility, we would continue with asynchronous activities, and begin the reflection process. A final online facilitated dialogue session would be included to enable participants to continue reflecting on lessons learnt, what went well, what did not, and what they have learnt about themselves and about others. As a consortium, we see the importance of there being more than one online facilitated dialogue session, and the inclusion of asynchronous activities to complement the online facilitated dialogue sessions.

Reference

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