



# intercultural learning

Intercultural learning has been and remains central to European youth work. The need for it became clear within Europe after the Second World War, when reconciliation and peace-building were at the heart of international youth activities. But early international youth workers certainly understood the values behind it. Since the beginning, intercultural learning has played an essential role in countering stereotypical and prejudicial racist views and in trying to undo the significant damage done by racial ideologies.

It remains fully relevant in today's globalised world, which requires special skills for intercultural learning and dialogue within multicultural communities and societies, from local to global level.

Intercultural learning and intercultural education owe a great deal to the work of the Council of Europe, especially the educational approaches and practices of the European youth centres in Strasbourg and Budapest. However, the understanding of intercultural learning, and the way in which it is practised by youth organisations and youth workers, has strongly changed and developed over time.

In recent years, the status of intercultural learning has grown both politically and in terms of policy. The 8th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (in Kiev, 2008) recognised intercultural learning as being “particularly relevant for promoting intercultural dialogue and combating racism and intolerance”.

The *Youth in Action Programme* of the European Union remains one of the main European programmes promoting intercultural learning among young people all over Europe. Most recently, in 2011, the Council of Europe published the report *Living together: Combining Diversity and Freedom in 21st century Europe*. In this report, the importance of education for diversity is highlighted with some concrete examples taken from the programme of activities of the Council of Europe's youth sector.



## -----> What is intercultural learning?

The concept of intercultural learning, like the concepts of culture or intercultural dialogue, can have various definitions. Many researchers and practitioners have struggled to come up with one clear answer to what it is. What they have all agreed is that it would be limiting and fail to reflect the complexity of what intercultural learning means and conveys. The Council of Europe's white paper on intercultural dialogue does not define culture either. However, certain models, theories and explanations have been proposed over the years.

One first important distinction to be made is between multiculturalism and interculturalism. Whereas the first term, most often used in politics, only refers to the variety of cultures existing within the same society, the latter implies actual interaction and "living together" in the society concerned. Multiculturalism by itself can already be conflictual. In multiculturalism, diversity is often perceived as a threat, and "otherness" as a danger. But intercultural learning addresses ways to live together, coexist and contribute to the development of common, diverse societies. An intercultural society is a society in which diversity is seen as a positive asset for social, educational, cultural, political and economic growth. A society with a high degree of interaction, exchange and mutual respect for values, tradition and norms<sup>1</sup>.

According to the Council of Europe's training kit (T-Kit) on intercultural learning<sup>2</sup>: "intercultural learning, on a more literal level, refers to an individual process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes or behaviour that is connected with interaction of different cultures". Intercultural learning, as further described in the T-Kit, helps to explain how people with different backgrounds can live together peacefully. It defines both the competences needed as well as the process to be used to achieve that aim. In that sense, intercultural learning is not just about learning from books. It concerns learning about oneself to start with, about others and their differences, and finally, about what is cultural in each person.

One dilemma faced when trying to define intercultural learning is precisely this: how can we determine what is cultural, and what could be social or economic – or simply personal - in the differences between people?

One of the most famous and widely-used models to explain intercultural learning is the so-called 'iceberg of culture'; the idea that culture can be separated into a visible part (the top of the iceberg), and a hidden, implicit part (under water). Although this model has been and still is broadly used in intercultural education, it has also been strongly criticised for simplifying culture and not taking into account the concept of identity. There is a classic confusion between identity,

1. Lafraya, Susana (2011) Intercultural learning in non-formal education: theoretical frameworks and starting points

2. [http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/4/Tkit\\_4\\_EN](http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/4/Tkit_4_EN)

culture, belonging and tradition, in which individual traits are generalised or linked to culture when they are actually much more difficult to define.

Even if it is difficult to agree on one, universally-agreed definition of intercultural learning, there are guidelines for intercultural learning practitioners which ensure that there is a solid understanding of what intercultural learning should involve and achieve. Some of these principles are:

- Openness to others
- Active respect for difference
- Mutual comprehension
- Active tolerance
- Validation of all cultures present
- Equality of opportunity
- Anti-discrimination

Henrik Otten, in his *Ten Thesis* on intercultural learning, emphasizes how important it is for intercultural learning to deal with everyday social and political realities in Europe, so staying close to the daily preoccupations of young people. He further states that intercultural learning should include an obligation to be intolerant towards violations of human rights. In another thesis, he argues that intercultural learning is, naturally and by itself, political.



Peter Lauritzen and Henrik Otten both underline the following three essential principles for intercultural learning.

- Tolerance of ambiguity; the acceptance that different truths exist at the same time, that not everything can be explained through culture and that individual identity plays as important a role as culture.
- Empathy; being ready to put oneself into someone else's shoes is necessary to make intercultural learning possible; it is essential to be interested in who the other is, their reality and emotional background, to be able to listen and be willing to understand the other's point of view.
- Solidarity; the "practical, social and political side of empathy"<sup>3</sup> involves the capacity to work with others, in a group, to contribute to and be interested in everyone's learning process.

### Possible definitions

Peter Lauritzen<sup>4</sup> defines intercultural learning as: "discovery and transgression, change and revision, insecurity and uncertainty, openness and curiosity. It is a programme that opposes any limitation of the mind by national, continental, religious, ideological, ethnic, gender or political dogma".

The Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe, in a course description on intercultural learning in 2008, proposed the following definition: "Intercultural learning (is) the maximum common denominator between human rights education, anti-racist education, international cooperation and a sense of social justice".

Rui Gomes and Teresa Cunha<sup>5</sup> see intercultural learning as the educational approach which is required to ensure intercultural dialogue. They agree with Equipo Claves's definition of intercultural learning: "a process of social education aimed at promoting a positive relationship between people and groups from different cultural backgrounds". They further define the purpose of intercultural learning: "to inflect ethnocentric perspectives, fight prejudices and promote solidarity ... (to) support equality in human dignity and respect for the plurality of cultural identities".

According to Sanchez Miranda (1994), interculturalism is: "a space in which people can be different, marked by a history and a culture, a particular attempt to give meaning to everything. And each unfinished, complementary culture

3. See "Intercultural Learning", Lauritzen Peter

4. See "Intercultural Learning", Lauritzen Peter

5. See "Against the waste of experiences in intercultural learning", Cunha, Teresa and Gomes, Rui

needs to be able to show curiosity about other ways of living in the world, so as to understand others and be able to recognise oneself"<sup>6</sup>.

Intercultural learning is more than a purely educational concept; it has a political and policy dimension. As stated in *Mosaic: The Training Kit on Euro Mediterranean youth work*, intercultural learning includes the ability to interact and the capacity to act. It clearly encourages people to fight discrimination, to react to social injustice, to denounce xenophobia and to go beyond their own stereotypes and prejudices. At various times in the past 30 years, intercultural learning met either with strong support or strong resistance in different countries and from different political leaders. It is also interesting to see how political statements on the "failure of multiculturalism" keep coming up again every 10 years (Der Spiegel, 1997, discourse by Angela Merkel, 2010)<sup>8</sup>. What does this interpretation mean? Does it mean that intercultural learning and intercultural dialogue have not succeeded in achieving their aims or, the opposite, that they remain needed and essential approaches to living together in dignity?

One thing remains sure; culture and intercultural learning and dialogue are not static; they evolve, move and change with time, which also invites us to remain in a process of self-questioning, openness and readiness to learn. This is also true of youth workers' definition of intercultural learning and dialogue and how they put it into practice.

## -----> Intercultural learning through history

### Intercultural learning and young people

The 1970s and 1980s saw the qualitative – and, especially, quantitative – development of international youth activities, thanks to the European Youth Foundation and the activities of international youth organisations at the Strasbourg European Youth Centre and the first youth exchange programmes of the European Communities. These exchanges, which addressed mainly youth workers and youth leaders, focused on a value-based intercultural pedagogy, working with stereotypes and developing competences to ensure the success of intercultural encounters.

6. Sánchez Miranda J: Sánchez Miranda J. y otros (2001): "Mediación Intercultural. Una propuesta para la formación". Sevilla, Andalucía Acoge.

7. [http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/export/sites/default/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/11/6577\\_T-Kit\\_11\\_A4\\_assemble.pdf](http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/export/sites/default/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/11/6577_T-Kit_11_A4_assemble.pdf)

8. Der Spiegel (1997). The defeat of the multicultural society; Further on, Der Spiegel (2010). Merkel sees multiculturalism as a failure.



They played an important role in raising young people's and youth workers' awareness of cultural differences and the need to go beyond ethnocentrism. Frequently the concept of culture was (and still is) used to refer to national culture.

### Intercultural learning, education and policy

In the early 90's, intercultural learning was given a policy dimension. The 1995 *All Different All Equal* youth campaign<sup>9</sup> against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance provided timely impetus to the development of local, regional, community projects dealing with intercultural learning. Cultural diversity was also perceived as existing within countries and between various groups. Many youth organisations used this campaign as a starting point to work with minorities and to better integrate young people from other cultural backgrounds. The education pack *All Different All Equal* defines intercultural learning as: "a mutual recognition of diversities within societies".

Diversity started to be seen as a positive factor to be embraced and encouraged. From a policy perspective, the *All Different All Equal* campaign encouraged young migrants to create consultative councils and to become involved in local policy structures. Overall, intercultural learning became a more concrete, comprehensible concept, including the recognition of others and of individual identity.

Another important development in the field of intercultural learning was the development of links between formal and non-formal education. Traditional intercultural pedagogy in schools, which mainly included information about other cultures and religions, realised the need to go beyond traditional forms of education to reach out to excluded, marginalised young people and minorities.

The inclusion of young people from a Roma background, from migrant communities and from national minorities in the activities of the European youth centres further reinforced and made visible the link between intercultural learning as an educational approach and the fight against discrimination.

### From intercultural learning to intercultural dialogue

The beginning of the 21st century has been marked by terrorist attacks, wars and increasing globalisation. This has only confirmed the need for a greater focus on and political and educational investment in intercultural learning, in the fight against emerging phobias and fears.

9. The *All Different All Equal* campaign was firstly launched in 2005 as a campaign "against Racism, Antisemitism, Xenophobia and intolerance". In 2006, 10 years after and following an evaluation, the second *All Different All Equal* campaign "for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation" was launched in 47 Member States.

Various international organisations started focusing on what had by then become "intercultural dialogue": the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations<sup>10</sup> was created, the European Commission declared 2008 "European year of intercultural dialogue" and the Council of Europe produced its white paper on intercultural dialogue<sup>11</sup> – the first political text submitted to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers acknowledging the importance of education for intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue had therefore become more of a political project concerning all dimensions of life, implying mutual recognition, respect for the rules of democracy and active participation.

But does intercultural dialogue replace intercultural learning? How can intercultural dialogue be implemented in educational terms? Can dialogue be learnt, and is it enough for peaceful cohabitation?

One possible answer to these questions could be found which was, at the time, a new approach to learning – human rights education.

### Intercultural learning within human rights education

If intercultural learning is perceived as the educational approach which emphasizes the values of solidarity, empathy, equality and dignity; then human rights education is probably the approach best adapted to intercultural learning. It is important to note that, over the last ten years, the Council of Europe's Youth Department has developed its human rights education work through training and education, publications and as an overall priority. The approach is based on the universality of human rights, and thus the equal dignity of human beings, irrespective of their cultural background. Universality of human rights cannot be considered without accepting the concepts of tolerance of ambiguity and empathy: two concepts which are also essential in intercultural learning. As Miles Davis said: "If you understood everything I said, you'd be me...".

Initially, intercultural learning was not credited with an emancipatory or transformative function; it was seen a way of learning about other people and how to communicate with them. It is clear that the concept and experience of intercultural learning have evolved, and that it has become a reference in all work

10. The United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC) was established in 2005. It aims to improve understanding and cooperation between nations and peoples across cultures and religions. It also helps to counter the forces that fuel polarisation and extremism.

11. The White Paper aims to promote intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, based on the core values of the Organisation. The Ministers emphasised the importance of ensuring appropriate visibility of the White Paper, and called on the Council of Europe and its member states and everyone involved to follow up on its recommendations.

[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper\\_final\\_revised\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf)



of the Council of Europe, with young people and beyond. It now has, with the white paper, a political as well as educational dimension.

## -----> Intercultural learning in the Youth Department of the Council of Europe

Intercultural learning has been almost a mantra in international youth work in the past 20 years. The Youth Department of the Council of Europe played an essential role in this development, first through the creation of its two European youth centres in Strasbourg (1972) and Budapest (1995), and through the wide variety of training and education programmes developed.

The European youth centres have been ‘life laboratories’ for intercultural learning. By bringing together 25-35 young people from Europe, and often other continents, for each residential education and training seminar, helping them to learn together, live together, share rooms and meals, they have been ideal and natural settings for intercultural learning to take place outside the classroom.

The long-term training courses on intercultural learning were one of the main tools for achieving intercultural learning, both in terms of content and approach. Even where the topic of a course was not specifically intercultural learning, it became clear that intercultural learning was the essence of and driving force behind any activity run by the Council of Europe’s Youth Department (even when misunderstood and confused with “intercultural evenings”!).

Intercultural learning quickly became a quality criterion for European youth projects and for project funding by the European Youth Foundation (EYF). “The construction of Europe is above all learning to live in a multicultural society. This learning is obtained through exchange or confrontation which form the basis of EYF educational policy”<sup>12</sup>. It was not just a topic to address, but rather an attitude, a global approach for any youth project developed in a European context.

Alongside the educational activities, a range of methods and educational approaches were developed to accompany the courses. Subsequently, the methods used were sometimes highlighted to the detriment of the content and the purpose of intercultural learning. It became necessary to provide training and education to put the methods into context, so that they would be used for their intended purpose – to promote transformative change in societies – rather than just as simple group work methods.

<sup>12</sup> Presentation of the European Youth Foundation, in *The Dublin Report: Training course for youth exchange organisers*, European Youth Centre, Strasbourg, 1989



European campaigns, such as the *All Different All Equal* campaigns in 1995 and 2006, played a crucial role in further mainstreaming intercultural learning in European youth work. The creation of new international youth organisations, working with minorities, opened European youth work to new groups of young people, thus developing intercultural learning to include new topics and dimensions. Since then, regular work with young migrants and refugees, Roma youth and national minorities has become part of daily life in the youth centres.

Beyond training courses and campaigns, the Council of Europe Youth Department also introduced study sessions very early in the 1970s. These are activities organised and ran by international youth organisations with the financial, logistic and educational support of the Youth Department. They take place in one of the youth centres and help non-governmental organisations (NGOs) develop their skills on European youth work topics. In those study sessions, which still take place today, intercultural learning is often an explicit topic, but always an essential part of any session. Some international youth NGOs even have intercultural learning as their main purpose or in their title.

The partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth has also focused on intercultural learning, notably with two research seminars, *Resituating Culture*, in 2003, and *The Politics of Diversity*, in 2006. Moreover, the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the field of youth has taken the concept beyond European borders, providing new perspectives and questions, such as described in the T-Kit *Mosaic*.



But what makes these training courses and seminars organised by the Council of Europe Youth field so special? What differentiates them from other training courses?

One essential difference lies in the deconstruction of culture. International youth activities: “are influenced by relations of cultural dominance which exist within and among multicultural/ethnic societies. Intercultural learning is the educational approach to lay open these differences and tensions and to work on them towards peaceful solutions”<sup>13</sup>.

When applying, participants are selected as representing a certain Council of Europe member state. But once they are together, they are asked to be themselves, to put aside their categories and act as individuals in a neutral setting. This encourages participants to detach from their cultural associations and to look beyond their mental borders. But it also forces participants to leave their comfort zone and be ready to experience and experiment in a safe environment. The European youth centres are ideal for such experimentation, as they help young people feel they are in a safe space, with professional educational staff accompanying and guiding their learning. Symbolically, it is also noteworthy that the youth centres are on European territory, and so are not literally on the grounds of a member state as such. They can therefore be considered neutral spaces for intercultural encounters. The learning which takes place in the centres is based on non-formal education methodology, starting from participants’ experiences and realities rather than from theories and texts. It assumes that all 30 participants have relevant contributions to make, have real experiences, feelings and thoughts about culture, about identity and about others.

The Council of Europe’s Youth Department and the Organisation as a whole is often perceived as a ‘school for democracy’. It provides a space to reflect, to work on individual attitudes and to bring about social change. Intercultural learning does not happen at the end of one activity or a week’s training. It is a process of change, which carries on once participants have left the centres and go back to their daily lives. There, they continue reflecting on the courses and on their experiences while interacting with others. The youth centres start a process which is then pursued and expanded beyond the initial activity. Many participants stay in touch, develop cross-border youth projects and continue to exchange contact.

Sometimes, in order to make intercultural learning authentic and to take into account specific considerations, such as conflict or social realities, educational activities take place outside the youth centres and in member states. The assistance programme, developed in the 1980s, ran many youth training activities in the Balkans and in the Caucasus, involving young people from conflict zones and using the local context as a tool for intercultural learning, thus bringing young

13. Dublin Report: Training course for youth exchange organisers, European Youth Centre, Strasbourg, 1989

people together who would otherwise avoid each other, fight or continue developing strong prejudices. In that sense, intercultural learning in some cases can also be understood as a tool for conflict management and conflict transformation.

Finally, unlike other fancy topics, which last for a while and then go out of fashion, intercultural learning is recognised as a reference point in all European youth work. The concept and the approach are not even questioned anymore. The only questions relate to *how* to ensure intercultural learning is achieved efficiently.

### Intercultural learning in other parts of the Council of Europe

Of course, intercultural learning and intercultural dialogue are not only priorities within the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. Its Department of Education, focusing on formal education, has been working on intercultural learning in the classroom for many years. Learning and teaching intercultural competences, which include both teacher training and pupil’s training, have been a way of ensuring that intercultural learning also reaches the formal education systems.

Various campaigns such as *Speak out against discrimination*<sup>14</sup> were launched by the Council of Europe, building directly on the youth campaigns and enlarging the scope of the work. One of the Organisation’s departments was even developed to specifically work on intercultural dialogue.

This proves that young people are only a part of European societies, and that the work done by the Organisation’s Youth Department over the past 40 years is a reflection of its priorities and activities.

## -----> Perspectives and achievements

The recent shift of emphasis from intercultural learning to intercultural dialogue has raised the profile of political work on diversity and living together in dignity. It has placed the importance of working on intercultural learning on the agenda of European policy making and mainstreamed it into many sectors of people’s everyday lives.

Nevertheless, intercultural dialogue still presents some dilemmas for the years to come and questions about the direction to take in the future.

- Is there a risk that the new focus on intercultural learning will take attention away from educational work?
- Does the new focus on intercultural dialogue not risk limiting human beings to cultural beings, thus going back somehow to the initial understanding of

14. <http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/ANTI-DISCRIMINATION-CAMPAIGN/>



individuals as representatives of their culture? In his paper, *Plastic, Political and Contingent*, Gavan Titley analyses the work on intercultural learning within the Youth Department of the Council of Europe and raises this concern himself: “the constant emphasis on anything called ‘intercultural learning’ compounds the tendency to centre culture as the key resource and problematic in social life and youth work activities”<sup>15</sup>.

- How frequently is dialogue about cultures? And is intercultural dialogue supposed to facilitate dialogue about cultures or between cultures? Here again, Titley states: “the question is not whether or not culture should be engaged with, but how, in relation to whom, to what extent, in interrelation with what, and with which underlying meanings”.
- Finally, is it necessary to speak about culture to have intercultural dialogue or does it naturally happen when “cultures” get together and exchange?

It is clear that the Council of Europe Youth Department has played a vital and central role in the developments of youth work in the field of intercultural learning, fighting social injustice and combating discrimination. But, in recent years, a new culture of fear has emerged, requiring more action and support to facilitate and ensure a continuation of dialogue and learning beyond political discourse.

A further challenge for European institutions, and especially for the Council of Europe as the home of human rights, is to recognise that intercultural learning goes beyond European borders. The Council of Europe now has 47 member states, which has made intercultural learning much more necessary, but also more ambiguous. With a growing “Fortress Europe”, the risk of excluding other citizens of the world – other young people needing access to inter-cultural dialogue and wanting to take part in intercultural learning – is a real one. These are challenges which the Council of Europe’s Youth Department already recognised some time ago and which led to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and partnerships with international institutions beyond European borders.

Finally, to close with some inspiring words by Peter Lauritzen: “Respect of otherness, individuality, the capacity to live with insecurity and ambiguity within communication and the intention to increase “mixophilia” (Baumann) should be the cornerstones of an educational strategy aiming at a better management of diversity”. What more could we ask the Youth Department to do – with the same success and professionalism it has shown over the last 40 years – in the 40 years to come?

*Contributing author Nadine Lyamouri-Bajja*

15. See Titley, Gavan: “*Plastic, Political and Contingent*”

## Appendix 1: References and relevant Council of Europe publications and documents

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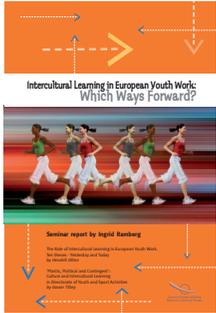
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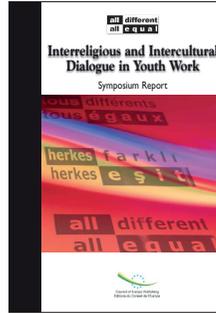
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-----> **Publications**



Intercultural Learning in European Youth Work: Which Ways Forward?



Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work

