



Preparing young people for intercultural experiences

Different ways and best practices to prepare young people for intercultural encounters and experiences.

Why to prepare young people to intercultural experience? Why not to leave this experience as a surprise, a wonderful adventure maybe! Is it really needed to do all this effort, and waste all that time? In intercultural experiences where young people are involved, our duty is to really prepare them, especially because of what is happening in our societies. Our awareness of intercultural differences is both useful and necessary in today's world.

When going abroad, it means that we are going to experience another culture than ours.

In order to understand culture, it is important to see it as consisting of three elements: Values (ideas), Norms (behaviors), and Artifacts (things, or material culture). This is why in every project we plan for, we take into consideration these three points.

How?

When going for an intercultural experience we need to learn about another culture, for that we have two main approaches to choose from. The first is to learn as much as possible: the language, cultural background and history, social rules, and so on about the specific culture that we expect to deal with. The other is to develop general skills that will help to adapt in any culture.

The first approach is an individual one. Each one in the group will be asked to collect information about the other cultures (customs, language, history...), before traveling and during meetings with the others an exchange of information and debate will be handled.

In this article I will try to highlight the



second approach because this approach to cultural learning, general development of intercultural skills, is especially useful if we interact with people from a variety of cultures or subcultures. Among the skills we need to work on these features:

- **Taking responsibility for communication.** Do not assume that it is the other person's job to communicate with you.
- **Withholding judgment.** Learn to listen to the whole story and to accept differences in others.
- **Showing respect.** Learn the ways in which respect is communicated – through gestures, eye contact, and so on – in various cultures.
- **Empathizing.** Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Listen carefully to what the other person is trying to communicate; imagine the person's feelings and point of view.
- **Tolerating ambiguity.** Learn to control your frustration when placed in an unfamiliar or confusing situation.
- **Looking beyond the superficial.** Do not be distracted by such things as dress,

appearance, or environmental discomforts.

- **Being patient and persistent.** If you want to accomplish a task, do not give up easily.
- **Recognizing your own cultural biases.** Learn to identify when your assumptions are different from the other person's.
- **Being flexible.** Be prepared to change your habits, preferences, and attitudes.
- **Emphasizing common ground.** Look for similarities to work from.
- **Sending clear messages.** Make your verbal and non-verbal messages consistent.
- **Taking risks.** Try things that will help you gain a better understanding of the other person or culture.
- **Increasing your cultural sensitivity.** Learn about variations in customs and practices so that you will be more aware of potential areas for miscommunication or misunderstanding.
- **Dealing with the individual.** Avoid stereotyping and overgeneralization. We have also to be prepared for the diffi-

■ Euromed Good Practices

culties that we might face (Risk Assessment) during the intercultural experiences.

The more differences there are between the people who are communicating, the more difficult it is to communicate effectively. The major problems in inter-cultural experiences are language barriers, cultural differences, and ethnocentric reactions.

To overcome language and cultural barriers, there are some suggestions to follow and to take care of while preparing our group:

- **Keep an open mind.** Do not stereotype the other person or react with preconceived ideas. Regard the person as an individual first, not as a representative of another culture.

- **Be alert to the other person's customs.** Expect him or her to have different values, beliefs, expectations, and mannerisms.

- Try to be aware of unintentional mea-

nings that may be read into your message. Clarify your true intent by repetition and examples.

- Listen carefully and patiently. If you do not understand a comment, ask the person to repeat it.

- Be aware that the other person's body language may mislead you. Gestures and expressions mean different things in different cultures. Rely more on words than on non-verbal communication to interpret the message.

All these elements are very important. For this reason we organise before each trip three or four week-ends of preparation for the target group. Our main objective is to prepare the group to be ready for this experience and build the "group dynamic". We offer many workshops that are in close relation with the above-mentioned features using non formal education methods: simulation exercises, role play,

drama and theatre, experiential learning, outdoor and indoor activities, culinary art and other methods that can give us the expected results.

A programme is prepared each time by youth leaders with the contribution of participants to ensure that all needs are met. Preparing is preventing and reducing risks to maximum.

Be always prepared !



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■ Euromed training activity

MOSAICO: A Seminar on "Partnership Process in Euromed"

"Partnership means working together towards a common objective. Each partner needs to recognize each others' competences in order to achieve it. Partnership is not functional but is creative".

Within the Euromed Youth Programme, the notion of "Partnership" corresponds to formal criteria to apply to, but also to qualitative criteria for the good development of a youth project. This assumption was the starting point for the seminar, which gathered 11 countries, 27 participants in Le Bessat, France from the 4th to the 10th of September 2006.

Once taking for granted that without "Partnership" it is not possible to implement projects, the focus of the seminar was to increase the quality of the partnership in order to achieve a high level of cooperation and development of new concepts.

Therefore, the seminar gave possibilities to some NGO's to reflect

about the different conceptions of partnerships: sometimes with the same word we define different concepts! This could become a sensitive point when a partnership starts to work on concrete projects: misunderstandings are often linked to our daily way of doing... we do not pay attention to the others' experiences and ideas. Particularly, this applies to international projects where cultural and educational backgrounds are so wide. Building a sustainable partnership requires a long process of knowledge and experimentation. Building a partnership means spending energy and time in the mutual understanding.

MOSAICO has been a space for confrontation and reflection on