



by Laimonas Ragauskas

The “intercultural evening” in training - are we floating, diving or sinking?

Usually you can hear questions like this in preparatory meetings before a training course: “What are we going to do for the intercultural evening? Should it be something usual or something else?” It’s important to mention that recently it seems that hardly anybody takes into consideration such questions as “Why such an evening is really needed? What are its objectives and foreseen learning outcomes?” So I wonder if we simply leave it in for the sake of informal learning, which should happen anyway?

To be honest, I did not plan to write this article as I thought about the subject of it. I thought that “intercultural evenings in trainings” could be worth maybe a short paragraph in the Marker section at the end of Coyote. However it appeared that all my questions and ideas could hardly fit in three sentences. When reading this article I would recommend that you reflect not only on intercultural evenings as such, but also on any other method or training session that you use for the sake of intercultural learning.

Whenever I ask my participants during a training course, what are the things they like about intercultural evenings, they start naming various sorts of alcohol and sausages from various countries across Europe. I would answer the same if someone asked me! The first time I experienced an intercultural evening was back in 1999, in a training course for those willing to set up international youth exchanges. It was not my first training course. Along with my friends I used to have parties during courses before that. The difference was that no particular title was attached to them. Don’t ask me if I had learned something about other cultures during those evenings, but at least I know it was the first time that I tasted Irish whiskey and since then it’s one of my favourites! One may claim that this is also a learning outcome, but at this point the question arises: is this the effect we strive to achieve in courses during such intercultural evenings?

If you read applications for international trainings or youth exchanges, you will discover that probably 8 out of 10 appli-

cants claim that they will address “interculturality” through intercultural games and intercultural evenings. Probably most of the people writing these things were participants in trainings or other events where the word “intercultural” was mentioned only during such intercultural evenings. I have a feeling that such methods create opportunities to get to know culture merely on the surface.

Do you remember the iceberg concept of culture with its two parts – visible and invisible or the part of culture that we are aware of and the other not? The concept was recently criticised by researchers, because it can be used to present too much of a simplified, static picture of culture. But it is still probably one of the most understandable introductions to the concept of culture for young people or youth workers and that’s why I will use it to visualise my thoughts.



In my experience the majority of intercultural evenings in European trainings, are keeping people just on the top of iceberg. People may explore cooking, music, dance or language, but the “underwater parts of the iceberg” – deeper aspects of culture - are still undiscovered. Intercultural learning is not just about sitting on the top of iceberg, but diving deeper underwater to discover new things about one’s own and others’ identities and cultures within the group. I wonder if it is possible to start diving by just making one intercultural evening or two simulation games during training?

► Intentions to dive

Once I and some other trainers were preparing a training course on cultural diversity and we decided to avoid long traditional presentations of every country (in fact, not even the culture) with maps & flags, ancient songs and dances, enormous amounts of food and alcohol, and a terrible hangover next morning. We had an idea to make it also less national and more intercultural...You have probably considered those issues as well....

We thought that the intercultural evening could be based on interpersonal conversations in pairs where each person presents a symbol from the culture with which they identify themselves. The symbol was just a reason to start a conversation, to go deeper into exploring the “invisible parts of the iceberg” by speaking about things that are important parts of one’s own identity.

It looked like everything had been done in order to implement this idea: participants were informed in advance, information for them was written in a pretty detailed manner, etc.

Unfortunately the rule “we see things as we want them to be” applies too often in reality. In the event the “symbol of your culture, which could be a present for the other person” was perceived as a bottle of local vodka or bread and the participants were completely ready to present it to everybody and to make all people taste it. It was very interesting to observe how this evening developed further, because I saw part of the group quite confused about this idea of just having an open conversation with a peer from the group. There was such big ambiguity compared to the “usual way” of presenting each

country. Participants were still asking when and how could they finally present things that they had brought and give them away for tasting. Finally the evening evolved into something that people felt comfortable with – just having a drink, a song or dance.

It might be that somehow it is possible to speak about your culture via presenting vodka as symbol of it, but forcing others to taste it becomes much more important than simply having a conversation about your own culture, or cultures, existing in your country, etc. Hence, at that moment I lose the feeling that I am exploring cultures...

► Confronting perception

Then I understood that we were changing an old and very well-rooted traditional way of doing intercultural evenings and confronting people’s conventional perception of such an evening. Yet it was not as easy as the trainers thought it might be. I think we also met a challenge to explore interculturality in training in general.

Nevertheless this article is not about participants, who don’t have a clue. The case, mentioned above is perhaps the consequence of other training experiences that people had before. As far as the intercultural evening is seen partly as an “informal part of the programme” nobody is really reflecting on its usefulness or meaningfulness. People just take some parts of the training programme for granted. Remember my mentioning of my own first intercultural evening experience? Having participated in that one I got the idea that this is the way to do it and it has to be in all international events like that. Nevertheless I was much more critical about other parts of the training when adapting them in other situations.

► Why the floating continues?

Then I ask myself, what keeps people perceiving intercultural evenings in the “traditional way”? Here, a colleague of mine helps with some ideas. People having very few international experiences feel safer when they present their “own culture” by using very tangible things - drinks, dances, flags. Quite often those presentations are made in a slightly ethno-centric way (e.g., my country is at the centre of Europe, my country has the most sophisticated cuisine, my country has the most beautiful landscape or the most unique language). Indeed, people can feel stressful without having an opportunity to present “the beauty of my country” even though the objectives in trainers’ heads might be different.

Therefore the way we present culture to others is very much influenced by how we understand our identity and the culture we live within. When a person has had only a few international experiences, she/he perceives many things within their own culture as unique and, indeed, representing the essence of her/his culture. Things like a special local beverage, mom’s cake, a folk dance about wild bears and a national flag somehow meant a lot to me at the beginning of my “international career”. The more contacts with other cultures I had,



the more I understood, that the uniqueness or specificity of my culture lies in far less visible and tangible aspects of my culture, than just cuisine and dances. Eventually I found it not so interesting to find out what do you eat and drink, but it's much more fascinating to explore subjects like: what are taboos in one's own culture, what are the power relations among people and institutions, or what does personal independence in life mean?

Another concern of mine is what I see as a lack of developed critical thinking in training events; a lack of qualitative reflection (about the learning outcomes), or meta-reflection (about the method itself), even about partly informal elements of the training programme. Actually here is the trap which I recently discussed with colleagues of mine. If any part of the training programme is considered as "informal time" or "free time", it seems that trainers should not organise any reflections about it or highlight methodological questions or learning outcomes. However, if the evening programme is planned in advance, mentioned in the description of the training and even special preparation from participants' side is requested, then it becomes pretty much an "official part" of the whole learning process. Yet it was the most important thing for me to agree on an objective for such intercultural evenings. If the objective is just to provide space and time for people to be together informally, then I would do almost nothing except ensure the appropriate time and space. If the objective is about intercultural learning of participants, then I would not really agree that the typical intercultural evening might help.

► Still we can try...

From the moment when I understood that I should write this article I started making small experiments in trainings. I was providing space for open discussions with participants how such an evening should be organised. Is it really needed? What would make this evening intercultural and not cultural or national(-istic)? I was not only collecting proposals, but also confronting people's ideas in order to discuss how one or other activity would help to experience the richness of interculturality within the group. I started the next day with a small reflection on the previous evening in order to understand what happened and grasp the learning outcomes. However I felt that even though it was a nice evening, it was still held on the very top of iceberg. It was a kind of open air party. Sounds good, doesn't it?

Nevertheless if you decide that participants should have space to share their traditional food, here I suggest some ideas to consider for exploring culture through taste (still being aware, that only very limited parts of cultures will be explored). Instead of an intercultural evening, one could make an intercultural morning, lunch, or coffee breaks, giving space and time for participants from every country, represented in the training event. Going further, those time slots could be dedicated not according to countries, but to cultures if you manage to identify such...

Furthermore, instead of asking people to bring food and drinks, we could ask them to bring a symbol or three photos or prepare a short sketch, visualising various aspects of one's own culture. Useful questions could be: how do people work in their youth organisation? By what means do people show they are in love? How do they interact with the authorities? How do they understand time? How do they see the outside world and themselves? Such sketches can be prepared in mixed groups, where all people need to share certain aspect of their culture.

I finish the article with a few methodological questions to be considered: Is the intercultural evening a part of the "official programme" or part of free time activities? If it's a part of the programme, how often do we reflect with participants on it during the next day? Do we help participants to learn anything from it?

Some people tend to say that the Intercultural Evening just serves to speed up group dynamics. I agree, but once again the same question arises – what is the main purpose? How does it correspond with the aim of the training? Why should we do country presentations for group dynamics? In my experience, there are many more (effective) ways of doing it.

If an intercultural evening is expected to contribute to intercultural learning of every participant, let's think what kind of activities can help with this educational process? How should people from different countries interact? When should the activity happen? How should it be prepared? How should it be debriefed?

Finally I'm still asking: is an intercultural evening obligatory?

Notes and references :

- T-kit no.4 "Intercultural learning", Council of Europe and European Commission, November 2000

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