

Introduction and Methodological Background

Intercultural and interfaith dialogue

COURSE FOR EXPERTS

GE4Youth /Global Education for Youth Workers



Intercultural and interfaith dialogue

Area introduction

Interfaith and intercultural dialogue have the potential to bring people from across religious traditions and diverse cultures together around shared social and political challenges. These resources highlight the perspectives of religious leaders, scholars, activists, writers, and students working across differences to learn from others and accomplish shared goals.

Our multiple and changing cultural identities

Whatever community we belong to, it is full of diversity – differences in gender, age, culture, ethnicity, abilities, religion, languages and attitudes. From birth, our family and community envelop us in language, understandings, values and beliefs so that we will think and behave in acceptable ways. As we grow up and interact with our community, we become members of different groups and expand our understandings, values and behaviours.

Globalisation, social media, migration and urbanisation are all leading to increased connections between people of diverse cultural identities, and intercultural understandings are becoming more important for respectful interactions.

Engaging with people of varied backgrounds expands our world view, develops greater understanding of our own identity and helps us to appreciate alternative points of view, but it can also be challenging. If we focus on the differences between people, separating groups into 'them' and 'us', there is potential for conflict and for people to be discriminated against and treated unjustly.

Cultural identity

Our culture is the way we think and behave. It encompasses lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Culture includes observable features such as language, food, clothes, celebrations, art and literature as well as the less observable features of attitudes, beliefs, values, status and use of time and space, which form the basis of the visible.

Culture is dynamic, changing through interaction with other cultures and adapting to different environments. Attitudes change over time – for example, attitudes towards slavery and the rights of women.

Cultures are not always connected to nationality. For example, wealthy young people in different countries connecting through social media may have more in common with each other than they do with poor or older people in their own country.

Generally, we are so comfortable with our own culture and so consider what we do as 'normal' that we may not be aware of our biases, prejudices and inconsistencies.





Cultural diversity

Culture can unite people with similar values, attitudes and beliefs, but it can also divide and disconnect people. Discrimination or abuse on the basis of ethnicity, religion, nationality, socio-economic status or gender makes people feel worthless, fearful or threatened. This may lead to violence and conflict. Lack of consideration of cultural diversity can mean people are excluded from groups and from education and health services, which lessens their contribution to the community and ability to earn a living. This is an abuse of their human rights.

Minority groups in society may be in danger of losing their language and unique characteristics as they are expected to assimilate to function fully within the culture of the dominant group. This can lead to the loss of individual identity and cultural knowledge, which has been refined over centuries and which may hold the keys to building a sustainable future.

As communities become more diverse, they need to find ways to live peacefully together. Some people expect minority groups to assimilate or blend in completely, like a 'melting pot', with the dominant culture. Some people show appreciation of other cultures through sharing of visible aspects, such as food and festivals, known as multiculturalism. Other people view cultures as parts of a mosaic, acknowledging their differences, but valuing a deepening understanding of others and negotiating interaction that acknowledges shared values and intercultural understanding.

Building intercultural understanding

Everyone has their own way of expressing their culture and responding to other cultures. Encountering other cultures can result in 'culture shock', but along with a commitment to human rights and the determination to ensure a sustainable and peaceful future there is the need to develop intercultural understanding and the values and skills that will promote this. These include values of respect, empathy and tolerance, and appropriate and effective communication skills. Resolution of conflicting points of view relies on a willingness to listen, avoidance of stereotypes and the ability to negotiate differences and adapt behaviours. As cultures evolve and people struggle to balance conflicting ideas, this is an ongoing learning journey.

Intercultural dialogue

“Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other’s global perception.”

Objectives and conditions ▲

In a general sense, the objective of intercultural dialogue is to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging. Intercultural dialogue can also be a tool for the prevention and resolution of conflicts by enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.





What is interreligious dialogue?

Interreligious dialogue, also referred to as interfaith dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. “faiths”) at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbours, in schools and in our places of work – it can take place in both formal and informal settings. In Ireland, Muslims and Christians live on the same streets; use the same shops, buses and schools. Normal life means that we come into daily contact with each other. Dialogue therefore, is not just something that takes place on an official or academic level only – it is part of daily life during which different cultural and religious groups interact with each other directly, and where tensions between them are the most tangible.

Theories of Religious Diversity

Religious diversity is the fact that there are significant differences in religious belief and practice. It has always been recognized by people outside the smallest and most isolated communities. But since early modern times, increasing information from travel, publishing, and emigration have forced thoughtful people to reflect more deeply on religious diversity. Roughly, pluralistic approaches to religious diversity say that, within bounds, one religion is as good as any other. In contrast, exclusivist approaches say that only one religion is uniquely valuable. Finally, inclusivist theories try to steer a middle course by agreeing with exclusivism that one religion has the most value while also agreeing with pluralism that others still have significant religious value.

Fight against Racism & Discrimination

The world is more and more interconnected but it does not mean that individuals and societies really live together – as reveal the exclusions suffered by millions of poor, women, youth, migrants and disenfranchised minorities.

In our turbulent international globalized landscape, a central message must be heralded: **peace is more than the absence of war, it is living together with our differences – of sex, race, language, religion or culture.** Peace is a choice to be made on each situation, an everyday life decision to engage in sincere dialogue with other individuals and communities.





Methodology background

Experts

The activities in the Experts' course aim to deepen knowledge on the topic of Intercultural and interfaith dialogue. This topic covers areas such as intercultural and dialogue, cultural differences and diversity, racism, discrimination, religions and interfaith dialogue. These are very important and globally known topics.

The activities use **methodologies based on key aspects of the global education approach** such as:

- **Cooperative learning** - learning in groups where each team member contributes their part of the task so that the whole group is successful. The method enables learning through **interaction**, improves participants' **communication skills** and boosts their self-esteem.
- **Problem-based learning** - encourages students to ask and answer questions, using their **natural curiosity** about specific events or topics.
- **Dialogue-based learning** - creates **oral interactions between participants** to stimulate the **exchange of ideas**. It acts as a bridge between people and creates a friendly space to develop ideas, reflections and suggestions, even if they are contradictory or different.

The block for experts includes 7 advanced activities. Each activity focuses on a different area and deepens different knowledge and skills. Each of the activities has different time requirements and different classroom facilities. The activities focus most on personal skills such as critical thinking, teamwork and perspective change. The activities most develop values such as self-esteem and respect for others, openness and proactivity.

All activities are recommended to be adapted to the size, age and composition of the group. Some activities may be more sensitive in content due to the psychological complexity of the topic. If this is the case, inform the group at the beginning and adapt the activity appropriately.

Activity 1 expands knowledge on the topic of migration and what feelings migration evokes in people. We aim to raise awareness that not all reasons for migration are negative.

Activity 2 learns the concept of migration and the causes of migration. Search for the causes and consequences of migration. Recognize that reasons can be both positive and negative.





Activity 3 activate the knowledge acquired so far and to use it in the context of a broader and more complex issue. Task is to identify the country that each family represents by working with photographs and interpreting the facts and context.

Activity 4 provides students with the means to approach the issue of social inequality in the world and related problems such as poverty, consumerism and others. It provides pupils with information that enables them to think critically about the issues, to consider different contexts and to look at problems in a holistic way.

Activity 5 focuses on awareness of what prejudice is and where it originates. The aim is to help students to perceive personal and group prejudices towards other people and minorities and to realize how "first impressions" or negative experiences mark our future behavior.

Activity 6 shows how senseless religious or racial intolerance between people is, based on prejudice and fabricated information, and how devastating it can be in the hands of powerful people if it becomes the policy of an entire nation. Using the example of the activity, students will conclude that people are equal, regardless of nationality, race or religious beliefs.

Activity 7 is aimed at highlighting the importance of education in a person's life. Students will become aware of the right to education, access to education and equality of opportunity in different parts of the world. Activity looks for the commonalities and differences in different parts of the world.

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