



Suggestions and Tips for Running a Successful ICD-Conference

*Dialogue...needs at least two persons who are capable of talking to each other. Stemming from the classic Greek "Dia-logos", two meanings may be deducted: the "flowing of sense" as well as "conflict" – very much in the culture of ancient Greek discourse; between these two poles we find the potential of the dialogic spectrum "... a contradiction, that **does not necessarily need to be resolved, but definitely has to move on**, a process which will instigate and inspire community spirit, fantasy, the imaginative power of community, for its own sake."*
Judith Cerwenka

The suggestions and conclusions drawn from our experiences listed below should underpin ICD-Conference planning and institutional arrangements. Although the methods applied were not really "new", it seems they are on the other hand not commonly used either. In order to motivate further use, we would like to share with you our "Lessons Learned".

General principles

- There is no culture in the world which is not the result of intercultural communication. "Intercultural" describes a dynamic process where the main focus is on the *relationship* and not on the *comparison* between "A" and "B". A's culture and B's culture may be solid, "C", the third and new element is liquid.
- ICD takes time, effort and commitment.
- Avoid generalisation when speaking about cultural diversity.
- In the intercultural context the process might be even more unpredictable.
- Progress may come from overcoming obstacles, or facing criticism, or from when things do not run as smoothly as expected.
- It is only at the point where disagreement/conflict surfaces/breaks out that the work on intercultural dialogue can start.
- Intercultural dialogue (or monologue) is *not* inherently and entirely positive and can never be (unless it is all about "convincing the convinced"), as intercultural (or interpersonal, for that matter) relationships are not necessarily conflict/clash-free: there is often a party which in one way or another (linguistically, physically, non-verbally) exerts dominance thus bogging down the potentially fruitful exchange.

- Two ways (dialogue) is needed for intensive cultural exchange. A one way (monologue) may serve to tell you something you do not know but it is not an exchange which produces something new ("C", see above).
- Working together across and beyond borders (geographic, linguistic, cultural, belief) one has to reflect, question and sometimes suspend part of one's identity, cultural background, beliefs, even emotions, in order to be able to accept something that is different.
- One principle of participation is that results may differ from original intentions.
- Listen to each other and create an atmosphere of mutual interest and respect.
- Learning is a matter of trust (in your own knowledge and in the competence of the teacher/instructor).
- Learning should be fun, when it is, the conference works.
- In order to learn something in depth you must be affected by it.
- Is there a danger in Dialogue? An essential dimension of dialogue is that it cannot be enacted; it has to be a voluntary process.

Logistics and structure

- To organize an interactive conference creates much more effort than to prepare a traditional conference. But it pays!
- The look and quality of the conference venue plays an important role: It can inspire or block communication.
- Poor acoustics and sound influence communication (especially when using microphones or headsets).
- People coming late or leaving early have an impact on group dynamics.
- Make sure, people get the chance to understand each other's language, use simultaneous translation, whenever necessary.
- One conference-day is good, two days are better: having one and a half days on our disposal was very useful.
- A good conference design will be an invitation to spontaneous participation (like during lunch break, though levels of participation may be different), will motivate participation and give participants self-empowerment – in the sense of taking/sharing responsibility for interaction!
- Reduce the input/agenda and give more free space for individual, bilateral communication.

- Try to create a certain conference rhythm: a well balanced mix of interactive and “traditional” methods leads to the best result.
- Allow for same time-amount for both action AND reflection.
- Keep working groups small, for each one to have enough time/space and interactivity to become tangible.
- Time has to be dedicated beforehand to briefing the experts and speakers: maybe a common preparatory session with organisers, rapporteurs and experts would do, leaving experts with content input only and rather have rapporteurs facilitate and report.
- Especially if there is little time, the feedback round should be clearly structured.
- Having to empty the conference room at a certain point may spoil interesting discussions at the end, so leave some space for leave taking.
- A “give away” at the end of the conference, related to the topic is a good souvenir for participants and supports promoting the idea.

Processes and methodologies

- Intercultural dialogue requires a clear structure and a facilitator with high communication skills.
- The time factor: interculturality can't be achieved overnight. It is easier to limit our ambition to identifying and formulating methods that enable people to (re-evaluate their attitudes and move towards interculturality more quickly.
- Keep the balance between strict planning (control) and leaving the space to participants (*laissez faire*, uncertain outcomes).
- If your event is well prepared you can lean back to see, what happens to your concept. It can live and develop when somebody else is taking over and uses the “tool” in her/his own way.
- Create a situation of positive interdependence – give common tasks to explore complementary competence.
- Participative exercises like the “Carpet of Symbols and Memories” make the unique potential of each individual participant visible.
- Fresh and new methods will encourage participation, curiosity is essential, whereas repetition might kill participation.
- Learning (change of attitude) may develop from conflict situations that require, though uncomfortable, an approach different from the usual acting.
- Learn by doing, merging contents and methods.

- Learning is an effort that needs to be built on solid foundations in order to work as well as possible. The best learning situations present themselves when you are open to encounters with new people and cultures.
- Culture and arts can work as training sources, because they are inclusive, motivating, stimulating. People have the opportunity of growing together, improving their attitude to the dialogue/confrontation and – why not – to conflict mediation.
- It is necessary to explain the rules and aims of the exercise, maybe even beforehand and to encourage participation by creating an atmosphere of confidence.
- Keep in mind that participants don't know your goal and approach as well as you do. That might sound obvious. But it is important to take more time to have a clear meta-communication about – what it is the conference about; what do the different methods stand for.
- Learning styles differ: through meta-linguistic and more subconscious (non-verbal, emotional, sensational) communication we can reach the goals that language, discussions and argumentation cannot.
- No learning process without conclusion: participants enjoy being active, but there must be time left for reflection after the exercise.
- The informal side of the event played an important role: having lunch and dinner together with the participants gave us and them the chance to networking.

Actors

- The coming together of participants at a meeting is unique. These particular people, at that particular place, at that point of time. Their active participation will always have to rely on basic dispositions of mutual respect and appreciation of the individual.
- Welcome participants in a real sense (rather than giving a welcoming speech, .i.e. a monologue by somebody who quits right after having delivered the speech).
- We ask from participants (and ourselves) to be flexible, yet we tend to forget to explain, WHY changes in the expected programme are sometimes necessary.
- Some people are not curious to explore and experiment new ways of learning. Some people maybe rigid, with great difficulty to let themselves go.
- We need to guarantee the respectful handling of each participant contribution – being aware of it and embedding the consequences

even more so, when we subscribe to the message your contribution is important, those who are here are the right ones.

- The agenda should be “conducted” by a facilitator (time and content wise) who represents and guarantees a red thread.
- The “facilitator” (who is not the same person as the trainer), has to guide and support people in learning processes. This needs time to share and evaluate the process, too.
- A facilitator has to combine two seemingly opposite qualities:
 - to carefully plan and monitor the agenda (presentations, have the potential for a good discussion, time for activity and reflection)
 - as well as intuitively give space to necessary amendments (reactions/interventions from participants like who needs to make a contribution, but avoiding monologues).
- A facilitator is like a tour-guide, using participants´ experiences and abilities. She/he facilitates participation but avoids “forced participation”. He/she knows how to set shared goals and create something new and, at the end of the journey, the facilitator will not forget to thank all and keep follow up contact.
- To a certain extent, a facilitator (and the planning team) despite intuition and instinct, have to have a high level of frustration tolerance, and know that they cannot suit everybody.
- An ICD-Conference provides ground for experts and participants to swap their roles: thus experts, who usually speak, have to listen and researchers who usually observe are observed – putting on the other’s moccasins helps gaining new perspectives.

We wish to invite all readers to share their experiences with us, when using the ICD-Design and to feedback their comments, critics and amendments to: info@wereurope.eu