

# Going Back

## to Awareness

*Linas Kukuraitis was a participant in the training course 'Why Not? Combining experiential learning with intercultural learning,' organised by the Social and Psychological Aid Foundation that took place in Bebrusai, Lithuania this June. Starting with four days of reflected experiential learning exercises including a 30 km hike, the course continued with activities run and reflected by participants. The course was funded by Action BII of the Youth for Europe programme and the Soros Foundation. Here Linas tells of his experience and the impact that the course had on him.*



The first thing that came to my mind when I heard that the intercultural-experiential course was going to take place in Bebrusai, was the view of a very nice place surrounded by lakes and forests and then I remembered its importance as a site where lots of basic Lithuanian youth policy decisions were made. So there I was in the middle of May looking forward to going to this place at the end of June. However, on the day that I came there I realised that I didn't feel any of the beauty of the countryside around, nor did I feel that I was in one of the most famous places among the youth. That was something related to my experience before going there.

At the beginning of May my colleague left for a month and a half for Scotland and I was left alone to lead the social centre, which the two of us founded in January. Bearing in mind the fact that to start the centre really needed a great deal of hard work and the fact that I was at the same time taking my examinations at Vilnius University, I found it difficult to be any where other than next to the computer in my job. On June 19, the day of the beginning of the seminar, I had my last exam and I also found out that I didn't pass the preceding one. That meant I would have to take it again in the autumn and that my scholarship was gone. So these were the main events which led up to the course for me.

My first impressions of 'WHY NOT' were not impressions at all but rather a big attempt to rehabilitate myself. The first evening passed with lots of foreign faces surrounding me, and my first attempt at remembering the names and faces of the partici-

pants. The only thing that touched me was meeting the trainers Arturas Deltuva, Mark Taylor, Kristina Kovaite, Dirk De Vilder, Corinne Grassi and Bart Vertongen. It was easy to identify them, although they were deeply involved in the group that evening.

The goals that I had for this course were very clear to me—to learn as many methods and practical things as I could, so that I could use them in the coming youth camp of my community. Moreover, I wanted to see how intercultural experience would fit with experiential learning, having in mind the exchange which my organisation is going to initiate next year between Slovenia, Germany and Lithuania.

The second day was dedicated to the theoretical part and to building up the relationship in the group, while preparing it for the hike of the next days. Looking back to this day, I see myself putting down into the notebook all the energisers, games and methods used by the trainers and following their every step. I was trying not to go very far away from the group but not really going deeply into it. The hike was a real pleasure for me, because it was my dream to let myself get carried away by summer and to forget all the misfortunes relating to my examinations. As a rule summer for me is closely associated to the lakes of the Bebrusai region, because my family, along with friends, used to begin every summer with a big camping weekend twenty kilometres from Bebrusai. For me it was a chance for some relaxed hiking through the woods and then boating in the lakes, which was actually something I was dreaming about all winter. This was a big oppor-



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tunity for me to try to get back to my feelings and refresh my relationship with the countryside. Although the group was really working hard caring for other members and co-operating in decision making, and although the surrounding environment forced us to stay closer to each other, I felt that in my inner world everything went on the surface. I could feel that after comparing the sharing of other group members. Maybe there was not enough challenge for me and I just stayed in my comfort zone, in which, according to Dirk, deep learning is not possible or maybe that was my inner problem? Maybe... It seemed that all the ways to my heart and awareness were heavily blocked and I needed to be given a strong shake to get my feelings back.

The activities in the next part of the course were very different. We went to Vilnius for group-designed activities (or 'city bound' as it is sometimes known) and some free time; then back in Bebrusai we listened to some theoretical inputs, organised our own activities, received feedback from the group and used a day of Open Space Technology to do everything we felt wasn't yet done. In Vilnius it had taken me two hours to get back to the world I had left before the course: family, friends, job, unfinished business, etc. While staying with them and talking about the course, I realised that the main idea of the course hadn't yet touched me. Somehow it was all apart from me and only on a theoretical level. It was also interesting to realise that I was missing the group. So I came back with the wish to go deeper into the group and to be more aware of the things I was being taught.

We had to create an activity within an international group which was a good opportunity to become aware of the processes going on in the group—it was all about helping the group go through different group phases. My work with the Spanish and Belgium women in one team was really helpful in discovering what gifts I had as a team member. It was a hard task working in an international team, it demanded a lot of effort, but the results were amazing. I saw that our activity was much more than the mere sum of our ideas. The feedback from the group and the trainers, who were also the participants in these activities, was another impetus to go deeper into the awareness about the group process, the theory of group development and the leader's position in the group.

The Open Space Technology day was very interesting for me. **[Editor's note: see Maria Frerichs' article about OST in Coyote 2].** I spent it watching a film about an intercultural exchange between Belgium and Latvia (which was very helpful for future plans), and joining discussion groups, which talked about the importance of reflection in the group development process and also the role of the trainer in the group. That was the time for lots of deeper insights. I realised that up until then, reflection had never been very important for me. I had seen it mostly as feedback for me as a group trainer, but it had nothing to do with helping group members to learn about themselves or trying to help the group to move forward. I also saw how shallow I had been always using different methods with groups. All the many books I had read about various methods pushed me into the constant search for new games, energisers, group leading methods etc., but I had rarely asked myself the question:

WHY DO I USE THEM? Good methods were the golden key for me in order to lead the group well. In this course I realised that there was a different way of working. The program was only half planned and the trainers were building it up during the ten days. I understood in Bebrusai that the trainers would first of all share their impressions about where the group is and what it would need in order to move a step forward, and only then would they follow discussions about the methods to use.

I came back to that on the evaluation and transfer day when I looked back at my expectations for the course which I had drawn and written on a shield, there were all my goals for the course – they were nearly all methodological things. Then I asked myself 'Did I get that?' Of course I did. I got much more. I got the inner understanding of the importance of seeing the group and also a strong wish to go forward into deeper awareness of the things happening within it and me as a trainer. So briefly I got things which I didn't even expect to get.

It was very interesting to watch how the trainers were different in their relationship with the group and how differently they led the group. It helped me to reflect on my own abilities as a trainer and to form my own style. I always watched the trainers in the group and that helped me to grow up. But the most surprising thing I found was that they were also in the learning process and they dared to talk about it.

There was another aspect which was perhaps more important for me as a person. I saw the ongoing influence the course was having on the participants. Long talks, working together and just being close to each other created something that later on, in the last circle of sharing, exploded in tears, poems and words coming from the heart. That deeply touched me and I realised that these people and the moments that we had spent together were very important. All those talks about didgeridoos, caving, magic and the different situation of women in Lithuania and Spain plus the magic of Bebrusai brought me back to my heart and awareness. Big thanks from me to the group.

When I came home and got back into my daily work I realised that there were two things for sure I had brought from the seminar: a great mass of theories, thoughts and feelings in my head, from which something should evolve, and also the realisation that from this moment on I would not be able to live the old life with the old way of seeing and thinking. Well, it is a little difficult coming back to friends, colleagues, the environment in which I grew up, all of which is so familiar to me, and where life seems so easy. Now I have just finished running a summer camp and somehow I see everything in a new light. I go back to what was written on Dirk's T-shirt: 'A mind that is stretched by a new experience will never go back to its old dimensions.'

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