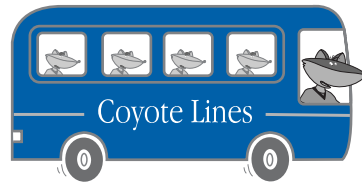




Leen Laconte



# Coyote Meets Trainers



Ginny Lun

*Coyote is a curious little creature and is fond of wandering around Europe to meet trainers in the field. Are you interested in getting a picture on how your colleagues in the field of training think and feel? Then this is your section.*

Ginny Lun taught in a school for children with special needs in Leeds, then moved on to Dublin where she worked in a project for early school leavers. Living abroad herself at that time, she realised very well the power and possible impact that an international experience could have specifically for disadvantaged youngsters. She introduced youth exchanges and voluntary service projects at her workplace and developed a large number of European activities and training. She then moved to London, where she has just finished the coordination of Breaking Barriers, a demonstration project to enhance the employability of young people at risk of exclusion from the labour market through transnational work placements, a project run by the Prince's Trust. Ginny is a member of the Youth Express Network, a European network of grass roots organisations working with disadvantaged young people. She has also participated in meetings of trainers and other experts in the youth field of the Council of Europe. At this moment Ginny Lun works and lives in London and enjoys being home and tired.

## Interview

**Coyote:**

Tired and happy?

**Ginny:**

We are undertaking a full project evaluation at the moment, but thanks to intensive monitoring throughout the project, we have collected some data on what the outcomes are.

Looking at hard figures, Breaking Barriers is a very convincing project, even more so than any other work I have done in the field of European activities. The project is making more or less the same positive impact in Sweden, Italy and the U.K. And we hope that the positive effects will still increase as we continue to monitor the young people.

34% of the young participants have jobs and a lot of them have gone on to further study. The young people themselves state that the project has given them more confidence in their abilities; that their communication skills improved and that it has given them real work experience and motivation. Even if not all of them are getting into jobs, a lot will go into further training, and will travel more than they have ever done before.

Young people at the margins of employment are sent to interviews but feel that they don't have a lot to talk about. Now they can say: 'I lived in Sweden for six weeks and I have work experience.' It is having something to tell, which gives

them more confidence to talk to people.

We believe that the residential aspect accelerates change in people. It means taking young people away for a short time from everything they are used to, from how they are perceived by their peers. Suddenly they can become whatever they really want because nobody knows them.

**Coyote:**

What was Breaking Barriers all about?

**Ginny:**

The aim of the Prince's Trust European Programme is very simply to offer opportunities to participate in European activities to young people who would not easily find access on their own. We provide funding and support for ideas they come up with themselves like taking part in a seminar, studying or voluntary work abroad.

We also organise special projects like Breaking Barriers, aiming specifically at long-term unemployed young people. The key objective was to develop the skills and employability of long-term unemployed young people through the provision of structured transnational work placements. We also wanted to work in partnership with the private sector to develop the support systems required to assist the young people to re-enter/enter the labour market. At the same time,



we wanted use this project to evaluate the added value of a European dimension in work experience, identify best practices and examine the feasibility of incorporating transnational work placements into mainstream provisions.

A total of 384 young people aged eighteen to twenty-five from the United Kingdom, Italy and Sweden participated in an intensive training of three weeks before taking up a four-week work placement in one of the partner countries. All of them were long-term unemployed and 61% had no formal qualifications above level one of the National Framework. They were all at risk of social exclusion through long-term unemployment, academic underachievement, lack of parental support or because they lived in areas of urban decline or rural isolation.

The young people were offered a wide range of work-placements: from charity shops to schools, TV stations, Internet retailers, theatres, dentists, football clubs and accountancy firms. Even London Zoo was on the list of possibilities.

**Coyote:**

Do you see any need for improvement now that the project has finished?

**Ginny:**

If we run this project again, we need to develop a way of maintaining the link after the experience, perhaps by using ex-participants as a support for new participants.

It is like when you have had a mind-blowing trip during your holidays: When you get back from your holidays, this is what you would like to talk about, but nobody understands. This is even more so when you have never before left your village or region. You get so excited and need an experienced listener, or you fall flat and the experience gets lost. The young people we work with need that somebody, the volunteer or another particular person whom they can talk to before, during and after their experience.

To summarise, it is essential to link your experience abroad to your local situation. The relation is necessary because it allows you to talk about your experiences, to become aware of the benefits and of how to use them in your daily life.

To me, the value of a European activity really lies in what happens when you get back. It is crucial to organise the European activity in such a way that this local link, this transfer is actually central and aimed for. A lot of organisations do European activities in isolation.

**Coyote:**

What kind of training did you provide for within Breaking Barriers?

**Ginny:**

First of all, to me, the word training refers to technical skills-oriented professions like carpentry or mechanics. I would use the word facilitation, others call it education. Whatever word you use, it should not sound like doing something to somebody else because it is not. It is about facilitating change, supporting people's development, motivating people to do it for themselves. Whatever word you pick, if it means something official, formal or obligatory to one person, you'd better use another word.

We developed an international training pack for pre-departure training supposed to be consistent throughout the U.K., Italy and Sweden. It was important that all the participants were getting the same message and were being prepared in a similar way, because we wanted to deliver all of them the same kind of certificate at the end.

Throughout the project it has become clear how much and what kind of support participants really need. The training needs to deal with language skills, practical details, knowledge and information, about the culture and the country. But underlying all of that, the most important need is learning how to deal with new situations, the unexpected, change. This became the absolute focus in our training. It doesn't matter how much knowledge and information the participants have, how well developed their language skills are. It is about going to have to deal with a situation which will not be what you expect.

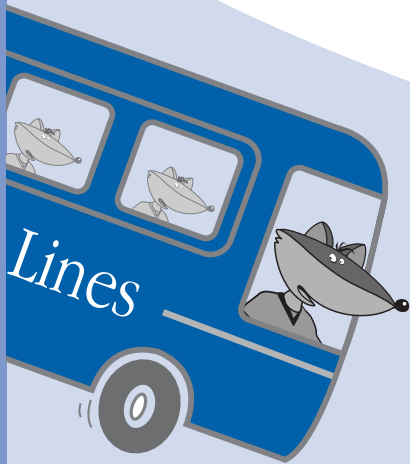
The young people were often horrified at what they found on arrival. We thought we had prepared them so well, but things can be so different from what they are at home. That is why we changed our whole way of working. We gave them less specific information and more training on the skills you need to be ready to deal with what you do not expect.

**Coyote:**

How on earth do you train people for the unexpected?

**Ginny:**

You can tell people about winter in the North of Sweden, the darkness, the solitude, the freezing cold... nobody outside their homes after eight o'clock at night. But it is amazing how much it doesn't mean anything until you are actually in that situation. It is far more interesting to use other young people who have been in that



situation, because they share their personal experience rather than stating meaningless facts.

It took us quite a lot of time to find a good way to train the young people on this topic. It is difficult. We tried practical situations, role-plays... When you first start as a participant in a training situation, you are in an entirely new situation. In the end we used that fact a lot as something to work with.

**Coyote:**

Why not to let them go and allow them a fresh authentic experience even though it is a frustrating one?

**Ginny:**

Some of them are so vulnerable. Or, yes, maybe it is our own need as trainers to see participants as vulnerable, to be protected and prepared. Before they leave, young people are focused on getting information. I am always surprised by how specifically they want their information delivered. What are the names of the people who are going to meet us at the other end? Where is the check-in at the airport? Through my personal international experiences, I think, I got used to a lot of change and I forgot how difficult it is having to start to adapt, but in the end it becomes normal to experience the unexpected.

**Coyote:**

Is this something we did not learn at school?

**Ginny:**

School meant absolutely nothing to me. I left as soon as I could and spent a year travelling, and this meant more to me than all my years at school. It was the first time I started to learn a language. It was the first time I started to read about the history of where I was and loved it. For me, it changed my life and from then on I did loads of other things.

I was in a very unimaginative school. For me, it was just so uncreative. It left me with a lack of confidence and a feeling that learning was a battle I could never win. It did something though; it gave me the ability to organise and structure myself, to be disciplined, to behave, to do what I was told... social education: how and what to do in certain situations.

I have worked in a school system because strangely enough I trained to be a teacher. So I know what formal education does. My plan was to change all that. I was in a group called alternative teachers: fighting for smaller class sizes and more support for young people and I gave up and decided to work outside the

system. It was also the time when the national curriculum was coming in; things were being imposed nationally and I was bringing in puppets. More and more, the time for that was being squeezed out. Basically I decided to take a break from it. But I didn't go back.

**Coyote:**

What are your ambitions as a trainer?

**Ginny:**

Being a trainer means always being away from home. It is residential and means living a very exciting and intense situation all the time. I love the intercultural environment but it is tiring. I have been looking at people who have done it for years and been wondering if I could do it for such a long period.

What is it that draws people to do this kind of travelling work, this nomadic existence? It is exotic to see all these exciting places. I always get something out of it. But I fear that people who do this all the time, lose contact with their friends and with what is happening around them. You lose touch with your home environment.

There is the whole thing of knowing people who have known you for years, those old friends. How important are they in your life? There was a time when I thought that wasn't so important. I just moved on, lived in Ireland, made new friends, adapted to new situations, met new people. This is all very exciting. Now, for the first time, I really appreciate living here. I actually fly back here and think: 'I'm home.' My sister is in London, my brother is near. I enjoy seeing my parents. Maybe it's age, I don't know. One of my best and oldest friends happens to live down the road. To me this is so important. I suppose it is normality—something which I would always avoid. At the moment I feel like I want normality, even though I have always questioned what it is. My life is not so normal.

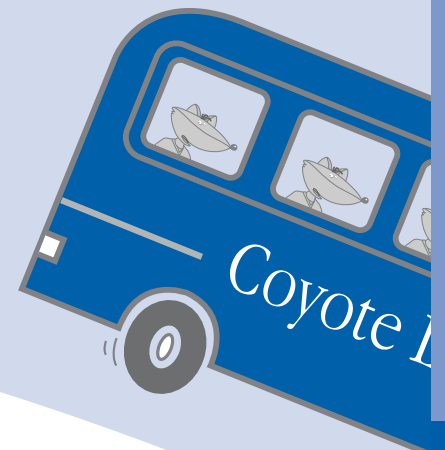
**Coyote:**

Why is it necessary that trainers meet?

**Ginny:**

Europe has created this need for European trainers that did not exist before, and it is always useful to exchange methods and learn from the way others are doing it.

It is necessary for trainers to meet and to get people together who work in a similar field, to have an understanding and a belief in what they are doing because training can be very isolating. It is very useful to have a platform to discuss the effects of training.



A nice thing to put on the agenda of the next trainers' meeting would be some research on these effects. The general feeling is that a lot of participants in European training events have as a result left their organisation and moved on to something else. I certainly know it accelerated my own work. What training does for young people on a personal level it does for youth workers on the professional level. Maybe we should be better informed about these effects.

**Coyote:**

What characteristics do you consider typical for yourself as a trainer?

**Ginny:**

Humour: I like to think that I don't take myself too seriously. That's very important. And openness. For some reason, young people talk to me very easily. That is what I aim to do: To come with this openness. Yes, I am approachable, with certain limits of course and I have a genuine liking for young people actually. I like being around them.

**Coyote:**

And what is typical for them?

**Ginny:**

There is something about this generation, no matter from which country, which surprises me. They all have very high expectations of what they should have. In Breaking Barriers they knew exactly what kind of work they wanted, regardless of their skills or of what they had done before. They wanted to be designing web sites or D.J.-ing in a real club, which was not easy to find in Northern Sweden. They had dreams. They believed firmly that you could have a lot quite quickly if you were noticed. They have heard about the Spice Girls or Boyzone, people coming from the inner-city who found fame, stardom. In Italy, they offered the participants work placements in tourist farming communities in absolutely gorgeous accommodation. But for the young people it was: 'No way I am going to plough a field or pick grapes, absolutely no way.' They rang up screaming at me the whole time. When I was young, I picked stones from a beach in Turkey for three weeks and thought it was fantastic.

It has of course to do with self-esteem, the confidence to be able to pick up stones or plough a field without feeling that you are not worth anything. They did not mind working if it was a company with a name. They would do anything as long as it was something with a label. At one point, we put some of them in a charity shop. We had to take them out. It referred too much to the situation they wanted to escape from. We had to change the type of work to make sure it had a sort of glamour to it. Young people want to be noticed. They want to live in 'clubland'.

**Coyote:**

Is there any hypocrisy in European Training Land?

**Ginny:**

A lot of people in our field think that they are open-minded, but when it comes to sexuality, then sometimes you might be surprised. A lot of people might not know that I am a lesbian.

I am not waving the flag. I would not announce it; I prefer dealing with it naturally. I prefer it if people just know and maybe it would come out through a discussion perhaps. I do not have any mission to educate people on this topic. I do not need nor want them to accept everything I am and everything I do. It is the same as being English. The fact that I was English was a problem in Ireland only the moment I said it. It changed the way people perceived me. Funnily enough, I have never seen myself as English. People would think that I was Irish, which I like because to me it was so much more charming to be Irish than to be English. But now I am generalising myself.

**Coyote:**

And that is what a lot of my fellow countrymen in Belgium do as well in reaction to the violent British Hooligans during the European football championship.

**Ginny:**

It is scary to see that the instigators are middle-aged. Something needs to be done before young people are drawn into that. There is a need to link the image which football supporters are getting and the way young people get into it. On the other hand, it sometimes scares me that young people consider drinking and fighting in general as a kind of normal behaviour when they go to another country. It is not only related to football. But now Europe is sending our lovely children back to us together with a bill probably for damage done. It is not going to do the European image a lot of good.

A lot of people here laugh at anything European anyway. In Ireland Europe is valued. Here in England, it is much harder to get people see the value. I don't know if it is particularly the English way of thinking they are better than the rest of Europe. There is a lot of Euro-scepticism: The structures cost a lot of money. And nothing is coming back. People feel we should focus on local situations: There are plenty of problems, and the local level is where change can and should happen. What's the point of spending all that money?

**Coyote:**

Do you feel related to your star sign as a trainer?

**Ginny:**

I am Aquarius, the carrier of ideas, visions and dreams. I like to make things happen. I need to believe in what I do. At the start of Breaking Barriers, people said it would not work, but decision-makers always say that because their attitude towards young people at risk is quite negative. They are not worth trying to do this for them. This project was one of the most challenging things for me. It took about eighteen months of my life, as they say. It was my sole mission to make it work. I did nothing else but make it work. And it did. And now I am tired and happy.

Ginny Lun can be contacted at:  
[ginnylun@princes-trust.org.uk](mailto:ginnylun@princes-trust.org.uk)

*This interview was conducted by Leen Laconte.*

