



by Meg Rybicki

# Exploring the use of the Arts in intercultural and inter religious dialogue

My interest in instigating youth arts programmes and youth exchanges dealing specifically with the themes of inter-ethnic, and inter-religious dialogue, came about after an upsurge in violent incidents involving young refugees and locals where I live in County Donegal, Ireland.

## ► Part of a bigger picture

My organisation implemented a series of projects that involved local young people and young people from marginalised backgrounds in a bid to “problem solve” on neutral ground, to defuse tensions. A programme of arts-based activities, using drama, film, music, and role-playing workshops, led to a slight reduction of those tensions within the community and pointed the way for community leaders and youth workers to conceive of future “seed beds” for reconciliation between protagonists and people who have been on the receiving end of verbal or physical racial abuse. (“Seed beds” are, literally, a neutral ground upon which to “plant” and “nourish” ideas, ideals, and solutions to problems).

Our organisation obtained funding from our National Agency, Leargas, to run a year-long project entitled “Embracing Diversity, (The Aswun Film Project)” which produced a training/information film exploring exclusion, media distortion and misrepresentation of minorities, and the asylum seeking process. The project was chosen by Leargas to represent Ireland at the recent European Youth Week in Brussels in early June 2007.

The actual shooting, editing, and distribution of the short film was undertaken by young volunteers and their friends. This brought the issues of intercultural dialogue, inter-ethnic and cross community cooperation to the fore, as our group of young people came from Ireland, England (a group of young Muslim men), Sudan, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and

France. The subject matter of the film was extremely uncomfortable at times - for all the participants - as it covered the topics of increased immigration to Ireland, the “ghetto-isation” of parts of inner cities and suburbs, immigrants being perceived as accepting lower wages than locals and the mass emigration of the Irish to Britain during the Great Famine from 1845 onwards. The young collected press cuttings which painted a picture of chaos, civil disorder, “race” riots, “wage undercutters” and ghettos, if immigration to Ireland from the EU and beyond continued at its present rate.



The young decided to film the extracts from the newspapers in “mock” documentary style, comparing the alarmist, misleading, Irish headlines of 2006, (for example: “**A Tsunami of foreign workers threatens to flood Irish Shores!!!**”, “**TB epidemic caused by increased immigration**”, “**Polish workers live 18 to an apartment**”, Ireland, March 2006), with the vitriolic and

trumpeting headlines in the English Spectator Newspaper in 1845, which declared, “**The Irish are FLOODING into Liverpool, with pestilence upon their backs, willing to live 16 to a room, to work for the clothes on their backs, and food in their bellies!!**”, “**There is already a ‘little Ireland’ slum in Manchester!**”

Important intercultural dialogue took place after the actual shooting of the film, as cultural, linguistic, and religious differences were discussed impartially amongst the young people and organisers, so they were able to understand, (after taking on “roles” within the filmed workshops), why fear and



mistrust of cultural diversity is so easily exploited by politicians, the media, and those within our communities, who are intolerant of difference, and do **not want** to acknowledge the benefits of interculturalism.

In my opinion, young people who have been at the “interface” of racism, and religious or cultural intolerance, are often totally ignored by policy makers, politicians, and statutory bodies, and their voices, ideas, and possible solutions to instigating dialogue, **are not heard**. NGO’s and community Youth and Arts organisations must take up the challenge of providing a link between voices from “grass roots” levels, and those with the power to effect change.

The training methodologies adopted for the duration of our film project were inter-linked workshops, which increased the learning curve of the participants’ perceptions of difference and diversity, and acceptance of each others’ ethnic and cultural heritage. We used visual arts and newspaper articles to demonstrate how certain groups are stereotyped by the media and political parties, and we ensured that our participants experienced and understood these issues in workshops using drama, role play, music, dance and film.

Some may argue that a more formal approach to intercultural training/dialogue is required, in order to achieve “concrete” and valorised “results”. I strongly disagree with this view having been involved in the non-formal sector for many years. Film is a wonderfully fluid platform from which to base intercultural dialogue as *intercultural learning involving a rigid “Trainer-participant” framework sometimes has no spontaneity, and could actually stifle creativity.*

A remarkably effective intercultural dialogue training workshop was to film “live” a role reversal and disempowerment exercise called “The Refugee Experience” which can be adapted, honed, and used by many groups in a variety of situations.

The group was briefed by a leader who gave each individual a new identity. Their stories were similar in that each individual had supposedly lost their homes, jobs and families for the “crime” of belonging to a new political party in the Military Dictatorship of Ireland. Each individual was asked to envisage fleeing their home country, leaving behind everything and paying ruthless people-traffickers everything they had to give them passage to Africa. They were asked to imagine themselves reaching the safe haven of Lagos, Nigeria, only to be turned away after the Nigerian government had affiliated itself with the Military Government in Ireland. Finally, they were told that they were to try to enter Yaounde, Cameroon with no documentation, papers, visa or money, (a reality for many asylum seekers who are then given derogatory labels by the media such as “bogus” and “illegals”).

*The confidence of the “Doctor”, “Lawyer”, “Reverend”, “Teacher”, “Pilot”, “Human Rights Activists”, in their ability to convince the “Immigration Officials” of their identity and purpose in trying to claim asylum in Cameroon, ( because of the political situation in Ireland), soon gave way to the real emotions and even tears, of anger, confusion, hopelessness, despair.*

As soon as the exercise was over, it was very important to debrief the participants and ask them to sum up their experience in a few short sentences. We have included versions of this “live” filmed workshop in our short film (named Aswun – Diversity Reels) and its impact on the participants was very successful in measurable terms, as during our filmed evaluations some of the participants admitted that they felt that asylum seekers, refugees, and economic migrants were causing problems in their communities. By taking on the role of someone desperately striving to gain the right to reside and work in a “safe” country, the young people were able to embark on a process of real dialogue and suggest ideas and solutions for their own situations.



***“We have never really seen asylum seekers as being real people, with the same emotions, problems, hopes and dreams as the rest of us”***

***(Sayeed Khan – young participant from Bradford).***

Under further debriefing, the UK Muslims admitted feelings of resentment towards the “new communities” of Muslim young people in their area who are mainly from Somalia, Sudan, Iran, and Iraq and they admitted that they had been openly hostile to these young people attending “their Mosques”.

After a full evaluation of the youth project our organisation was able to conclude that by using drama, role play, media studies and digital film, we had surpassed our expected outcomes of the impact of the project, as the film is being used by a variety

of both NGO’s and statutory bodies to promote intercultural learning. Unless more emphasis is placed on inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue in Europe, we are at risk of creating fractured communities with dividing lines drawn firmly along the issues of ethnicity, religion, culture and cultural heritage; restricting integration of communities and leading to segregation of education centres, workplaces, and housing.

Our programme was never intended to be a “stand alone” project, and has successfully resulted in “spin off” projects. It has “multiplied” into at least four separate strands: a Polish Youth Exchange involving filmed workshops; a website with our Bulgarian partners highlighting joint projects, ([www.the-bigger-picture.ie](http://www.the-bigger-picture.ie)); funding from our local Development Agency to facilitate an Arts-based action to enhance cross-community integration and the commissioning of a short film to be made by asylum seekers.

Our Arts-based projects have included producing and recording an intercultural music CD with young musicians from Togo, Congo, France, Ireland, Cameroon, and Cote D’Ivoire. We have made three short films, produced a community centre mural, a stained glass sculpture, and a huge mosaic to name but a few examples. By using Arts-based projects as a tool for both intercultural learning, and intercultural dialogue, we have enabled young people and facilitators from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to work together towards common goals, which in itself necessitates bonds being formed and networking to take place.

Our films, music and materials are available to interested groups and individuals and we welcome new partners and ideas to maintain a fresh and innovative approach to our work.

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