

Autobiography

A method to take into account pre-migratory experience and the migration path

In migrants' empowerment process emphasis must be put on the need to recognize and valorise their entire migratory path, focusing on the three phases of the process; each phase is a different learning step for the migrants generating the acquisition of soft skills, of which the migrant may be quite unaware:

- pre-migration phase refers to the migrant's life in the origin country (family, educational, social, working aspects and related formal, non-formal and informal skills acquired)
- migration phase starts from the migration decision to the arrival in the new country. This phase may last several months or years and include the intermediate crossing countries where the migrants may have stayed and work. This part of the migration story often remains concealed, while it is extremely important to be examined and understood since it may concern traumatic experiences.
- post-migration relates to problems faced/solved during the arrival and settlement in the new country.

Migrants' current competences are the results of all the experiences made in each moment of their migration story (the above mentioned three phases). A skill assessment referring to the whole migration experience is required to make newcomers aware of what they have learnt (mainly informally) and how such learning can be declined in competences which may be used on the labour market and encourage social inclusion. Migrants are generally unaware of how many soft skills they have acquired during the migration path and how these soft skills are strongly required by recruiting companies. So they must be supported to primarily recognize those competences related to their own home culture/country (pre-migration) and the ones related to their migration experience; they secondly must be helped to suit them to the working environment in the host country.

The autobiographic method is a way to valorise self-narration, self-description and self-person's reflection in view of exploring one's acquired skills. Oral storytelling is a social relationship engaging both the teller and listener: the former is required a certain level of exposition and the latter is required the acceptance of the other. Storytelling is much more than telling a story, but it is a way to re-think an event and it is a means to create the identity of both. Oral storytelling is about what happens between people while they are sharing the story.

Anyone able to share an experience can tell a story; no professional skills are required, but mutual trust and confidence are essential conditions for people to open up to others, to dare to tell in front of others. For refugees this is even more relevant, as they carry additional burden due to stress and

traumas they may have experienced and due to their condition of being foreign to our cultures in terms of how we speak, interact and learn.

Leading a storytelling session requires a preparation phase devoted to team building. The atmosphere in the group is “the more or less fertile soil on which the subsequent steps will take place”¹. Here are some tips for a successful session of storytelling:

- **Choice of place:** it must be quite and comfortable. It would be better to avoid tables and put chairs in a circle, which let everyone to see/be seen and hear/to be heard.
- **Making the group:** it must not be too large (10-12 persons may be reasonable). A kick-off session of **ice-breaking exercises** is useful to create trust and confidence within the group (Physical ice-breaking exercises are suitable to loosen up for story-telling, but are not appreciated in every culture, especially by women).
- **Rules and roles:** the rules of the game must be declared in advance. It is advisable that the trainer share and agrees the rules with the group: the place is safe, confidentiality and privacy is guaranteed; everyone shows respect for the other; no one judges anybody; the group sustains the individual; showing feelings is allowed and is a good thing (it is okay to cry, to laugh, to be calm, to show feelings or to be vulnerable); questions are welcomed but answering is not mandatory. Some rules may be suggested directly by participants and shared by the all group. The trainer acts simply as a facilitator, sitting together with the group and having access to his/her feelings and vulnerability. The facilitator needs to be flexible, open minded, and curious. S/he is expected to have a prior basic knowledge about cultural backgrounds of the learners in order to manage properly the intercultural relation.
- **Avoiding technical explanation:** there is no need to talk much about storytelling. It is a technical term that may create wrong impressions and expectations. Just start as it is a game.

To encourage people to tell their stories there is a variety of tools, which may be used in individual or group sessions. The tool described in the card “Self-portrait in words” is generally distributed to the participant in paper format. Each one reflects on the questions proposed and can take some notes on it. After individual reflection participants are invited by the trainer to share their presentation. An alternative use of the tool may consist in making the participant draw all the mentioned parts of his/her body with the possibility to use different dimensions according to the more or less importance given to them.

The **card “Presentation by hand”** is another storytelling supporting tool. It may be used in individual or group sessions. Each participant is asked to put his/her hand on a paper and trace its contours. After drawing the hand the trainer asks to reflect on the five questions corresponding to the fingers (questions may be changed according to specific contexts and targets). The participant takes 5-10 minutes to reflect alone and then tells his/her story. The answers given are the trace of the self-presentation s/he is going to do. Hands may also be coloured or painted.

If the tool is used in group, after reflection phase, all participants may be asked to walk in the room space with their paper hand. At a specific signal of the teacher (whistle, clap...) the nearest persons mate and share their hands and stories. As an alternative all the written papers with hands may be put on the floor, while participants are sitting in circle. A person picks a picture and the author is invited to tell his/her story.

¹ The LISTEN Manual, *Learning from Intercultural storytelling*, Erasmus+ project, page 14.

Strengths of the method

- It requires active listening (willing to listen is the only task required without being assessed).
- It strengthens the sense of community among the members.
- It brings immediate reward for the storyteller, but also for the listener.
- the group encouragement enhances self-esteem of all the members.
- It improves the use of oral language, vocabulary and literacy competences, such as understanding of plot, sequencing and characterization (mainly for low-educated persons).
- It improves visualization, creativity, imagination and other soft skills.
- It improves empathy with others and with others' culture.
- It strengthens critical thinking by comparing different tales and different behaviours in similar situations.
- It is a living context for making meaning, for sharing experiences, problems, imagining solutions.

Resources

- European Commission, COM (2016) 377. Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals.
- Helliwell, John F., Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, eds. (2018). World Happiness Report 2018. New York: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (available online)
- Hendriks, Martijn (2018). Migrant Happiness: Insights into the Broad Well-Being Outcomes of Migration and Its Determinants. Rotterdam: Erasmus University (available on line)
- ILO, Geneva (2017), How to facilitate the recognition of skills of migrant workers. Guide for Employment Services Providers (available on line)
- The LISTEN Manual, Learning from Intercultural storytelling, Erasmus+ project 2016-1-DE02-KA204-003341 [<http://www.listen.bupnet.eu>]
- Salis Ester, Pastore Ferruccio, (2017) LABOUR_INT. Expert Group on Skills and Migration. Final report.
- *Sheherazade*, 1001 stories for Adult Learning, Grundtvig Multilateral Project.
- Stroud P., Jones R., Brien S., (2018) Global people movements. Legatum Institute Foundation in partnership with Oxford Analytica (available on line)



<http://www.centroestero.org>