

Intercultural learning

Intercultural learning is not just about learning from books, it's a mixture of informal, non-formal and formal learning. In that sense the European Voluntary Service is a long-term comprehensive program containing a lot of tools to support intercultural learning such as: living in international environment, often with people from different country/countries; learning and speaking foreign languages; getting to know customs, traditions, good and bad sides of host country; presenting home country to others and facing stereotypes that people have about it; providing mentoring and supervision to a volunteer. All of them allow a young person to develop competencies and skills that in the future help them to become more open-minded, tolerant, respectable and comprehensive member of the society.

How does a volunteer learn?

One might say that EVS is an on-going learning process and a cultural process. Every day a volunteer learns something new about the host country, about the language, mentality of the people, food, customs and traditions. Every day he/she learns how to communicate, respect and live with people from different countries and cultures, as well as explain to others where is he/she coming from. What's more – every day he/she learns something about himself/herself, gets new knowledge, develops competencies and skills.

- But the process itself is a bumpy ride for most. European Volunteers, as any people moving abroad for different reasons, experience of CULTURAL SHOCK. It has four stages:
- Honeymoon – fascination by the new culture, seeing what is new and old in a romantic light. Usually, lasts for few weeks and like every honeymoon eventually ends.
- Negotiation – differences between the old and new culture start to cause frustration and anxiety, it's hard to communicate and make relationships with people on the same level as in home country; the individual gets homesick. This stage usually starts after 3 months.
- Adjustment – the individual grows accustomed to the new culture and develops a routine. Starts to consider things as 'normal' and has a positive attitude towards them. Usually after 6 to 12 months.
- Adaptation/Mastery – the individual is able to fully and comfortably participate in the host culture

How does a RO/CO learn?

Many EVS coordinators know the feeling in the end of August when new volunteers are coming in few days. First few weeks are about explaining how things work in the organisation, answering questions about the host country and mentality of the people. During the next few months, it becomes visible that the volunteer understands more about the culture, becomes more open to differences. Of course, somewhere there is the aforementioned negotiations stage of cultural shock when a volunteer needs the support of CO/RO/mentor to go through it. Later he/she adapts and just when it happens, it's time to finish the project. And the whole process starts over again. Organisations experience their own cultural shock stages and go through their own learning process. We learn from volunteers as they learn from us. Let's not forget that and try to see those young people knocking on the door of our office every few months not just as someone that we have to support and teach, but as someone with whom we culturally exchange and become more tolerant and open-minded ourselves.

What do locals get from it?

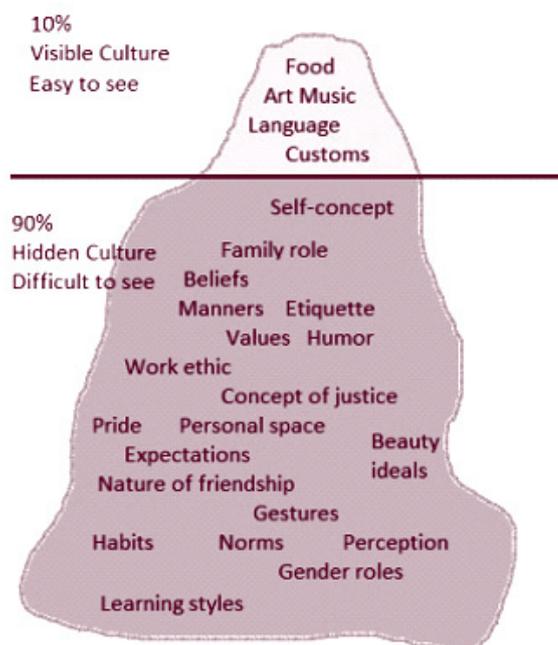
When I moved to Estonia more than 4 years ago to do EVS in a children centre in Tartu, I was the first foreigner some children had ever seen and had the chance to talk to. In the beginning, they didn't want to sit next to me or play with me, but after a while, their curiosity took over. We have hosted 8 EVS volunteers since and invited many guests from other countries. Children got used to it and became more tolerant towards foreigners. The example of NGO Öökull shows how much good and changes a volunteer can bring to users and local community. This works the other way around too – they exchange with each other. It's highly possible that there will be misunderstandings and conflict between those two, but this is the place where a coordinator, supervisor and mentor step in.

Iceberg theory by Edward T. Hall

Culture is like an iceberg. What is seen on the surface is just 10% of the actual culture. The 10% are what's seen and experienced by tourists or visitors such as food, language, holiday customs, flag, the way that people dress, art, festivals, literature.

The remaining 90% is under the water and people need time and effort to make it visible for themselves. Here we can mention values, religious beliefs, gender roles, assumptions, body language, expectations, learning styles, perception, norms, etiquette, nature of friendship, family role models and much more.

When we meet a volunteer, first we just see how he/she looks like, how he/she speaks, how is he/she dressed. We see the 10% that a volunteer also sees about us. It takes time and effort on both sides to understand each other more. Introduce your volunteer and co-workers to this model.



Few tips how to make intercultural learning easier for the CO/RO organisation and for the volunteer

- prepare the volunteer before the project – send them some links about your country, videos etc.
- obvious things to you are not obvious to a volunteer – explain a lot, answer questions
- take the volunteer for a walk to the city, show important places for locals, take him/her for a traditional meal
- inform the volunteer about local and national events

- suggest where they can meet the locals
- organise a language course as soon as possible (not an online one and not just a book)
- find a good mentor
- try to accommodate an EVS with other volunteers or locals (living in a dormitory or alone will not open a volunteer as much as living in apartment with other people)
- let the volunteer introduce their own country, traditions, food etc.
- be aware of the cultural shock curve and explain it to the volunteer
- don't push too hard, some people need time to adjust
- don't be afraid of misunderstandings and possible conflicts on a cultural level – they will take place anyway

Resources

Graph „Iceberg Theory“ based on Edward T. Hall theory, author Agnieszka Hanna Kunz

*Agnieszka Hanna Kunz,
NGO Öökull, long-term experience with topic
of EVS, Estonia/Poland*