



Participatory approaches in adult civic education: new practices based on lessons learned

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The design of civic education programs in Europe has been subject to many influences, not in the least political ones. Integration policies have become more strict and conditional over the course of two decades (Goodman, 2015), despite several recommendations and resolutions made by The Council of Europe to develop inclusive practices (Council of Europe, 2022). Public and media discourses provide a problematic view on migrants and integration (Goodman & Kirkwood, 2019), leaving vulnerable groups stigmatized as unwilling and consequently underserved. However, from a pedagogical point of view, migration is a major transition in the lifespan, affecting individuals and families. Furthermore, underprivileged groups need specific attention and support in their efforts to participate in a new society. Educational courses that exist to support migrants in their efforts to participate in a host society should be properly designed with pedagogical expertise. A participatory lifespan approach has been developed and practiced for the last twenty years and is now available in a practical handbook and workbook in the Netherlands.

Limitations in civic education practices

Many civic integration courses are still solely focused on in-classroom teaching in the second language for highly diverse groups of learners. The focus is on language acquisition and cultural knowledge only, with a fixed curriculum; teachers are mainly natives of the host country, and monolingual themselves (Beacco, Hedges, & Little, 2014). Furthermore, the teachers employ an instructive didactic style, using a teacher-centered approach, a static lesson plan, and mono-didactic methods. Traditional teaching didactics do not take the specific needs of migrant adult learners into account. Also, such courses ignore the complex, dynamic and fluid characteristics of culture and intercultural communication competence (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2017).

As a result, success rates of integration exams have dropped dramatically. This has forced the Dutch government to develop a new Integration Law, which has been in force

since January 2022. The new law supports different levels of learning, and thus is expected to be more inclusive and effective. However, unless a truly effective approach to teaching and learning is applied, nothing is gained, especially, but not exclusively, for first-time learners. For instance, with no experience in formal learning, no literacy as a method of memorizing, but with an extensive use of oral and visual memorization processes instead, the first-time learners have different pedagogical needs as compared to a student with a well-developed educational background. Also, learning the language is a lengthy process and, taught as a conditional competency, hinders the true goals of civic integration (Krumm & Plutzer, 2008). Recent trends in research show a focus on seemingly separate and quick-fix issues such as employment and access to healthcare (Integration Practices, 2022). However, such issues are deeply entwined with cultural backgrounds, beliefs and perceptions, for instance about gender roles. Paradoxically, by providing civic integration courses which are unilateral, limited and culturally singular, the tensions between majority and minorities are not adequately addressed (Arasaratnam, 2013).

The design of any formal learning process should start with goal-setting. Essentially, the goal of migrant education is not proficiency in language, but full participation in society. This includes political, cultural and psychological aspects of integration (Goodman, 2015). In more detail, it encompasses very practical issues like taking public transport, shopping, accessing healthcare and education, living safely together with neighbors and being able to apply for financial and legal support. At the basis of any society lies a set of ineluctable values that are the key to understanding its cultural practices (de Lange, 2017). In the Netherlands, the three basic values of freedom, equality and solidarity are now being explained to migrants in a few sessions, after which they have to sign an acceptance paper within a year of their residence. However, research confirms the intricate knowledge that such values are too abstract, too dynamic and too ambiguous to be captured and conveyed in a short course.

To summarize, the political, public and media discourses describe the negative and difficult aspects of civic education, whereas the law prescribes language-focused and quick-fix didactics to solve the issue of integration. Instead of succumbing to all these restraints, a pedagogical approach searches for ways to create a safe, inclusive environment that is conducive to learning and developing, starting at the level of the learners and moving forwards toward the true goals of learning. In the case of adults, such an approach respects the fact that people have found a way of self-organization already (Rood, 1997).

Principles of a participatory design

Participatory didactic methods worldwide have shown good progress in adult learners who have not profited from formal teaching. Two key principles of such methods are: learning about things that matter to them and learning by exposure to different perspectives (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2016). By focusing on what matters to individuals, instead of teaching a pre-defined and fixed model of culture, learners are encouraged to interact with others to explore their identity and the context of their own cultural group, which already holds different perspectives. Consequently, through encounters with locals and exposure to habits and language of the receiving country, other perspectives will enhance the learning process even more.

From 2002 onwards, the participatory program of Themis was developed in the Netherlands, and piloted in Europe between 2011 and 2013 under the acronym Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning: IDEAL, resulting in a Handbook (Rood & Nieuwboer, 2017). The program is aimed at social integration and participation and is characterized by its use of creative sense-activating didactic tools, a semi-structured curriculum, and a mother-tongue-based dual language approach. For the last twenty years, groups of (mostly first-time) learners in the Netherlands, by practicing the method, have contributed to the method's content and facilitators have been trained in competencies to guide and support the groups. Evaluations show that participants have more confidence, understanding of the host society, participation and proficiency in the second language.

Building on lessons learned, several design principles for the most effective conditions and didactic methods were identified.

- Double context learning. Using the experiences and perspectives of the learners as a starting point and the context of participation in the host society as a goal.
- Learning things that matter to the learner. Taking daily life experiences and needs as a starting point for building a curriculum.
- Learning by exposure to different perspectives. Using diversity within the group, proposing challenging views, working with buddies, inviting 'experts' such as a general practitioner or a teacher, and facilitating excursions in order to broaden the horizon of participants.
- Mapping. At the start of a course and following each module, participants are invited to map the topics most pressing and stressful to them.
- Role model facilitator. A similar-background role model facilitator shows feasible alternatives for perception and behavior and serves as a cultural broker. A bilingual social worker who understands group dynamics is perfect for the job.
- Homogeneous groups. Forming a group of learners with similar backgrounds is advantageous. They feel safe to experiment and accept change in the safety of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1968).
- Multi-sensory, semi-structured curriculum. By using many creative and playful didactic tools, the learning process is fun and leads to many experiences of success and encouragement.

- Mother-tongue-based dual language approach. Participants are encouraged to effectively express themselves in their native language (L1). At the same time, they are constantly challenged to learn the new target language (L2) in a functional way, mainly listening and speaking.

In 2022, the method is available as a publication in Dutch, including all suggested practical lessons on topics like health, communication, parenting, equality, safety and LGBT+ (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2022).

Facilitating rich dialogues which promote cultural understanding

Any teacher or facilitator knows how difficult it is to address issues like gender equality or homosexuality in a group of people, and especially newcomers from different cultural backgrounds, beliefs and religions. Consequently, many teachers will avoid such issues, even though they are precisely the most urgent topics to talk about. To illustrate the IDEAL approach, such an issue is not raised before the group has invested in a safe pedagogical climate in which everyone's voice is heard and learners are being complimented for being authentic and truthful, but also open to new ideas and perspectives. In the spirit of diversity, from day one, the group is trained to respectfully reflect on what other people have to say, fostering the right climate to talk about sensitive topics – and explicitly finding and using topics with tension, because they are most relevant. Conversations are not discussions, but exchanges of experiences, doubts, beliefs. Gradually, the second language is added and learned by practicing the most important words and phrases of the theme at hand. Every meeting is filled with creative elements like drawing, modeling, dancing and crafting; as well as field visits, excursions and interviews with experts. After modules on attention, health, assertiveness, development, respect, safe living, equality, solidarity and religious freedom, participants are thus prepared for a module on personal freedom. This module, as others, includes meetings in a deliberate sequence of complexity.

First the issue of self-determination is addressed. At the core of this meeting, children's legal rights are explored, addressing how they are formulated in the participants' countries of origin as well as in the Netherlands, in a quiz-like manner. Next, the learners engage in an exercise in effective communication if they disagree with someone who claims a certain right, which they find difficult to accept. In role play, all kinds of situations can be simulated, which makes the exercises light and efficient. In the next meeting, the group dives deeper into the concepts of dignity, honor and indignation. The goal is to understand that every country and culture has deep-rooted beliefs about what is right and wrong. And in any country, laws are in place to effectuate such beliefs. Learners are stimulated to know and reflect about honor in the country they used to live in and the country they now live in, speaking about differences and similarities, each relating to the applied rule of the law. The learners explore the differences between tolerance, respect and fully accepting such beliefs, in contrast to resisting them or fighting against them. In the next meeting, the freedom of sexual choice is the main topic. In full respect for personal freedom



and dignity, the group is invited to talk about individual choice as opposed to arranged marriages; homosexuality and other forms of sexual expression; including their questions and (possibly) fears. The last meeting in this module introduces a world map in which countries are highlighted which are known to have discourses about non-binary genders (up to five gender types). In a theatrical playful role play, the learners are stimulated to explore the boundaries and possibilities of a multi-gendered world.

Participants in Themis-IDEAL show good progress in language proficiency: after one year their oral language skills moved up one level (CEFR-levels). This enabled them, for instance, to have basic conversations with their general practitioner and the teacher of their children. Also, participants reported improvements in their mental and physical health; in family functioning and in self-efficacy (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2017). For many students, this was the first time they enjoyed learning.

As a student, I feel taken seriously by the facilitator. I don't feel threatened or belittled

The basic philosophy of Themis-IDEAL, as seen from a methodological perspective, is fueled by Paulo Freire (Recife, Brazil: 1921 – São Paulo, Brazil: 1997), who is the architect of participatory approaches in adult education. True participation is based on “knowing”: an insight that the causes of one's position in society are cultural, because they are determined by people and that culture is therefore changeable. This insight can lead to the transformation of one's own environment, of the existing cultural context. The result is change for the benefit of one's own expression, for the benefit of liberation from subordination and the apparent adjustment connected to it. The knowing (wo-)man has become aware of his / her influence (Freire, 1994). Civic integration is therefore an act of empowerment as a fundamental element of participation. Freire has inspired many practices of adult education around the globe. This ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ fills a gap in current discourses on migrant education.

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